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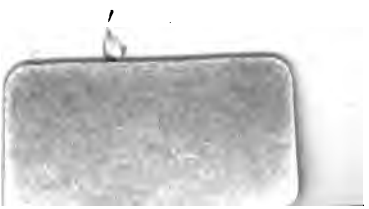
THE WIFE OF COLONEL HUGHES

HUBERT WALES



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The Wife of Colonel Hughes.

The Wife of Colonel Hughes

By

Hubert Wales

Author of

"The Yoke," "Mr. and Mrs. Villiers," "Cynthia in the Wilderness."

New York,

THE STUYVESANT PRESS,

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TO

MR. AND MRS. W. G. JACKSON

Now I come to think of it, you two have been in "on the ground floor" (as the predominant partner, with his grossly financial mind, would say) of most of my books. You unearthed me (the first of you) after the publication of "Mr. and Mrs. Villiers," when I was a terrible dark horse, unknown even to my publisher. You were the first to assure me (the same of you) that "The Yoke" was an astonishing book, for which I was likely to be paid in brickbats; a prophecy which has proved to be abundantly true. You read "Cynthia in the Wilderness" (the other of you) in all the negligé of proof, and passed a gentle judgment upon her (besides collaborating to the extent of a weighty word). The first of you, alleging—as I now believe, without suffiient ground—some Scottish ancestry or training, did your best to help me through the Scots dialect in "The Old Allegiance." (But, in spite of all our efforts, we failed to satisfy "The Scotsman," and he has never been very considerate since.) I told both of you the whole of the story of "Hilary Thornton" at dinner one night, before it was published, and you submitted patiently. And, in regard to this book, you have provided the title; or, at least, you carried by acclamation (the second of you certainly, the first, perhaps, with becoming restraint, after proper review) the motion I introduced that the first column of "The Times" might be an appropriate place of resort. So I write your names upon it, as a memento of these things, as an acknowledgment of my indebtedness, and as a sign of my attachment.

HUBERT WALES.

THE LONG HOUSE,
HINDHEAD, SURREY.

Transfer from Circ. Dept. 22 June 1911

The Wife of Colonel Hughes

Chapter I

"I WON'T!"

She put up two small, firm hands to her shoulders, drew resolutely round them her gleaming Oriental shawl—a network of little bits of beaten silver—and relapsed into her former position. Paradoxical determination showed in every curve of her supple, sinuous form. She was curled in a big chair, her elbow on the arm, her down-turned head supported by her hand. All her husband could see was the outline of her shapely figure in its clinging gown of Japanese gold and her crown of black hair.

Hughes was pacing the room—the pretty rose-pink and white drawing-room, which bore on every side the intimate impress of her taste and individuality. Rose-pink were the silk curtains, the wall-paper, the flowers on the tables; even the shaded electroliers shed a subdued light of the same soft

colour. Chester Hughes was a small, trim man, with a mustache prematurely white. His wife's uncompromising utterance brought him to a pause in his walk—startled and clearly distressed. Then he cleared his throat. It was not a rough and perfunctory clearing of the throat. It was careful and deliberate, and in some subtle way complimentary to his hearer, designed to assure that his words should come out unslurred.

"I *think,* Kitty, you scarcely appreciate the importance of the subject."

His speech, like his manner, was precise, even finicky. He pronounced the "Kit-ty" in two distinct syllables. Albeit, there was gentleness in his voice—gentleness as unvarying and as surely part of his nature as was the precision.

His wife's name, however, was not "Kitty," and only from him, and from one or two friends old or intimate enough to be impervious to repeated protest, would she suffer its use. It had been irregularly bestowed, in the first instance, by the English side of her family upon a child whose mother was French, and whose baptismal name of "Aimée" was not altogether grateful to their insular tongues.

She tossed herself across to the opposite corner of the chair. "Oh-h! Why do you worry so? You *can* be such a dear."

Her face was raised now, her dark, glowing eyes

looking at him, her dark, clear skin warm in the tinted light, one cheek pressed upon a cushion wedged into the shoulder of her seat.

Hughes looked at her affectionately and a little sadly, and again cleared his throat. "In many ways you are still very much a child, Kitty. You regard life as a game out of which it should be our purpose to derive the greatest possible measure of pleasure, and you are apt to display childish pique when you are threatened with some restriction of the measure."

"You don't want to restrict it," said Aimée, still looking at him; "you want to destroy it altogether."

"My dear, my dear!" exclaimed Hughes, genuinely perturbed at the suggestion of tyrannical traits in himself, "it is impossible to make you understand that we are dealing primarily, not with my wants or wishes, but with fixed principles, established laws, which as human beings it is our duty to obey."

"Oh, don't be tedious and trite, Chester. I've heard all that so often." Aimée slipped the cushion behind her, and dropped her head upon the back of her chair with an air of weariness. She was not unconscious that, in such an attitude, her small but perfectly proportioned figure was attractively displayed. "You know there is more than that in your wish for children. Your ideas are the staple ideas

of the English squire. In your heart you feel you have a sort of divine right to Brackett Hall, and this jolly little house in Curzon Street, and your chairmanships, and directorships, and your seat in Parliament. You never do anything from passion, from emotion, from impulse, from anything but a matured and calm sense of desirability. You were in no haste to marry, but, when you did so, you knew what you were about, and you had a definite object in view: you looked forward to a steady succession of announcements in *The Times,* at intervals of a year or two: 'The wife of Colonel Chester Hughes, M.P., of a son.' 'The wife,' you see—a mere chattel—a creature without any individuality—just a propagating automaton. 'Colonel Chester Hughes,' who has inconvenienced himself not at all, takes the centre of the stage, and receives the congratulations of his friends; 'the wife,' who is giving whole years of her life to discomfort and suffering, is the unnamed agent in the background. Then Colonel Hughes comes home, and brings her a little present, perhaps, and tells her to go on giving the years dutifully, and talks to her about fixed principles and established laws."

She took up a little chased silver cigarette-case, with a single sapphire in its clasp, and opened it. Hughes offered her a light, without speaking. Then,

for the first time since he had come into the drawing-room from dinner, he sat down.

He was a sensitive being, genuinely and earnestly anxious to behave well by all his fellows; and her speech had struck him more keenly than such speeches of hers—usually tinctured with chaff, and always free from venom—struck her auditors in general.

"I'm sorry to hear you speak in that way, Kit-ty," he said in his thin tenor—"sorry to feel that I have not impressed you with a better opinion of me. I admit that it would be a delight to me to have those of my own flesh and blood whom I could mould and cherish and watch during years of growth, and to whom I could leave, when I pass on, what I have to leave; and I do not deny that, when I married, I had some hope of a family. But I was prompted to seek you by other and more personal reasons—reasons which, since I have come to understand your attitude towards the matter we have been discussing, have made its moral aspect, at which you scoff, a real concern to me."

"Oh, I know I'm horrid," said Aimée, with quick compunction; "but you are horrid, too." She wriggled into a corner of the chair and blew a white cloud of smoke.

"Well, well! Tell me why." He was always susceptible to his wife's childish manner.

"To want to make me unhappy, and to talk about laws and principles."

"But don't they exist, whether we talk of them or not?"

"I don't mind that. Many husbands—most husbands—forget all about them, and their wives are not troubled."

"I don't think I know those husbands."

"But you are so out of date, dear." She broke her ash, speaking a little indulgently. The child had gone, and the piquant woman had returned.

"That is not my reputation in the House," said Hughes, somewhat nettled.

"Bother the House!" The tone was quite amiable. "Socially you are. You want to go back to the early sixties. People don't have children in the twentieth century."

"Don't have chil-dren!" His amazement was emphasized by the especially punctilious division of the last word into its component syllables.

"Oh, how easy it is to rouse you, you dear, silly old prude! Will you never learn not to take those remarks quite literally? I mean that present-day husbands don't expect their wives to be the domestic slaves their grandfathers did."

"But there can be no slavery, surely, in the conditions of your life, Kitty?" The tone was less reproachful than astonished. "You are comfortable

here and at Brackett? I do not restrict your expenditures or seek to supervise your social intercourse."

"Oh, no, you have given me everything. That is what makes me feel so horrid. You're a dear, and I want to be such a sweet wife to you, if you'll let me. Oh, do be reasonable, Chester. Do be a reasonable old dear."

"But you are not willing to give me children."

"How horribly you put it! And you know I've had one."

Hughes looked into the fire. "Poor little Phyllis!"

"She died, of course. But I had her, and I loved her."

"I feared——" He hesitated. "I may have been wrong, but I feared you did not accept the prospect of her arrival happily."

"You feared! I told you I didn't. I made your life a burden by telling you I didn't."

"But I feared that, conceivably, you were even endeavoring to evade it."

Aimée threw away her cigarette and lighted another. "I did everything I possibly could."

"You are blatant about it."

She drew a long whiff and ejected the smoke. "Absolutely blatant."

"And has it never occurred to you as possible that, except for that, Phyllis might have lived?"

"Oh, what a horrible thing to say! I'm sure it isn't true."

The door opened to admit a servant with the coffee. They each took it in silence. When the man had gone, Hughes got once more to his feet, his cup in his hand. He was too perturbed to remain seated.

"I wish I could make you understand, Kitty dear, the—the wickedness, even the criminality, of such practices."

"Yes, I know that's how the stodgy people in the House of Commons talk, and they look very solemn, but everybody does it."

He looked down at her with kind gravity—deeply shocked. "My dear, you don't realize what you are saying. You are making very serious charges wholesale. Your careless manner of thinking and speaking betrays you into extravagances."

"All my friends," persisted Aimée, "everybody I know. Of course they do. What a benighted old fossil you are, Chester! If you were in a tangle, wouldn't your first thought be to get out of it?"

"You can speak of such a condition as a 'tangle?' "

"A tangle—a tangle—a tangle! I really let you down very lightly when I used that word," said Aimée.

"But have you no conception of the joy?" he asked, with pained amazement. "Are you not

thrilled by the miracle that a new entity is to come into being, to whom you yourself will impart the predominant features and characteristics?"

"Oh, dear!" Aimée again turned in her chair. "Joy is what they call it on the green benches, isn't it? And they say it so nicely and properly, and are quite safe from any personal experience of it. You forget all about the joy when you know you have to look unspeakable for half a year, and to feel horrible, and never to go anywhere or do anything, and nearly to die at the end, if you don't quite."

"Kit-ty! Kit-ty!" His wife, with impious joy, was now striking him with a double-edged weapon. His insular modesty, as well as his moral sense, was outraged.

"And you know how I hate to look horrible, Chester," she said, plaintively. "I have such a nice figure." She was lying sideways in the chair, blowing smoke at the upholstery.

Sorely as it crossed the grain of his gentle spirit, Hughes felt it was necessary to exercise his authority. This was no meet tone for the wife of the squire of Brackett, where the villagers expected an example of decorum and restraint.

He softened the form of the injunction as much as he could. "For my sake, Kitty, will you try to get out of the habit of speaking in that way? You

do it spontaneously, without thought, like a child; but it is—it is not becoming."

Aimée turned and sat straight, suddenly covered by an air of peace and quiet elegance which suggested she could never adopt any other attitude. Her small head, its one heavy wisp of dark hair falling over the left side of her brow, lay back; the wrist of the hand holding her cigarette rested upon the chair-arm.

"Do be a reasonable old dear," she said again, softly. "I don't ask you to make any sacrifice—or very little. I only ask you to let us behave with—let us say, with a little foresight."

He made no reply. He was leaning with an elbow on the mantelpiece.

"Oh, Chester! Think! I am twenty-five now; and the next twenty years—the best twenty years of my life—you want to take from me."

Hughes began again to pace the room slowly. Full of generous impulses and warm sympathies, he had never, even in the flush of youth, discovered much capacity for passion or great emotions, and he loved his wife quite selflessly; he cherished her, perhaps it should be said, rather than loved her. His concern was consistently for her comfort, her happiness, her pleasure. Fascinated, when he was over forty, by her tender eyes, her enticing ways, her French vivacity and resource, he had mar-

ried her two years before, and taken her to his country seat at Brackett—somewhat to the surprise of his neighbors, who had otherwise provided for him matrimonially—and since then had assiduously furnished her with all the springs and cushions to protect her from the jolts of life which his considerable wealth could supply. He was well aware that, on her side, she had not been uninfluenced, in accepting the hand he offered, by his worldly position; but he would not have married her unless he had been satisfied that she felt for him a sufficiently warm regard to make his society agreeable. That was a feeling which might expand with the passage of time, which might develop into something closer and deeper; and, among the causes likely to promote such increase, he had thought that the chief would be the fusion of interests through the bond of common parentage. He was drawn, by a natural instinct of protection and of tenderness, to children, to all little, helpless, dependent things; he had looked forward buoyantly to the time when his own offspring would claim his care; and he knew that, if he were disappointed in that hope, it would strike deeply and permanently into his soul.

And now he was confronted with an aspect of the question which in his prenuptial days had never occurred to him. He was shown a picture of himself as a tyrant seeking his selfish ends at the ex-

pense of the peace, of the health, perhaps of the life, of a fellow being—and that being his own wife. She told him he was asking for twenty years of her life—for the twenty best years. Yes, he was. Joy and capacity for joy breathed out of every line of her young, flexible, glowing form; and he was asking her to relinquish it. In his preconception of woman, he had supposed that the new joy, in spite of the personal hardship to attain it, would obliterate the loss of the old; that no sacrifice would seem to her of account where such a guerdon was to be won. Aimée had shown him unmistakably that she perceived the matter differently: to her maternity suggested a grievous burden, inimical to joy. He was asking her for that against which her present inclination, if not her permanent nature, rebelled vehemently.

It seemed to him that he could not constrain her further in the face of such repugnance. He would see himself surely a tyrant, if he did. The subject must be postponed. He was approaching fifty: it might be that the progeny of later years would lose in stamina; it might be, too, that he would fail to see his children grow up and enter upon careers. But those chances must be taken. Aimée should not be stinted of her pleasures. All the light and beauty and entertainment which a young and fascinating woman can command, and

which his means could give her, she should have while she desired. In a year or two, perhaps in a few months, when she had drunk deeply enough of these things to realize their insufficiency, her mind might incline to quieter joys and more enduring interests.

He stopped in front of her. "Very well, Kitty," he said; "I won't bother you. Live your life in your own way; and when you are tired of that way, ask for your husband."

"Oh, but, Chester, what do you mean?"

Aimée jumped from her seat and went up to him, with a low swish of soft silks. Her figure was perfectly poised; her movements were the acme of supple grace. She put her hands on his arm and looked into his face. "What do you mean, Chester?"

He made no reply.

She pressed close to him, softened to childlike appeal, all the armory of her feminine charm leveled at him. "You know I am nice," she said, in a thrilling undertone. "I can love you very much. I have so much love to give." She put up a small hand and smoothed the crisp, slightly wavy, gray hair on the back of his head. "Chester, won't you let me give it you?—won't you—won't you?" At every repetition of the two words her red, parted lips came a little nearer his face.

It went to Hughes' heart to repulse her. He hated to hurt her, to refuse her anything. But he could not grant what she was asking now. "Kitty, I think you had better sit down," he said, gently.

The red lips were brought right up to his and pressed there, held there.

He released himself quickly and looked at her reprovingly. "That was not a kiss of love," he said, in his careless regulated voice; "it was a kiss of wickedness. I am not angry, but I don't like you to do it."

"Stupid old Chester!" she exclaimed, chagrined. "You've no passion at all—not even anger." Then she tossed herself back into her chair.

He stood watching her a few moments. She stretched her flexible form with an air of ennui.

"You are hurt, Kitty? I have grieved you?" He went towards her, his face puckered with concern. He rose with pathetic consistency to the bait of her vagrant phases.

"I'm bored with Colonel Chester Hughes," she said.

"I will go. It is time I got back to the House. Have you any amusement? Shall you go out?"

"I don't know."

"There is some party, I think. Or you can go to your Club and play bridge. No need to trouble,

We shall get on very well. You will order a room to be prepared for me?"

"You won't use mine any more?"

He stiffened a little. "In the circumstances."

"You won't?"

"Oh, no."

She waited, struggling a little with herself, her eyes fixed on his, tears somewhere not far from the surface.

Suddenly she dropped her arms on the side of the chair, sank her chin upon them, and stared into the fire. "Then—*don't.*"

Chapter II

For some time after Hughes had left her Aimée remained seated in the chair, staring into the fire, with her chin on her hands. She heard the hall door close, she heard him drive away, but she did not move. She was bitterly vexed with him and with fate, and very near tears. Why had she not married a different type of man, a sensible, modern, up-to-date man? Other wives had husbands who were sensible, nearly all the other wives she knew. She hated to see Hughes look as he had looked when he went out; she hated to be the cause of his looking like that. It was not resignation quite that he had shown, but a sort of stiff determination to be cheerful in face of a blow. He was disappointed, deeply, sorely. And he was such a kind old dear, so thoughtful and unselfish, and he had given her so much! Oh, she hated everybody and everything!

At last she got up and stood for a few minutes at the mantelpiece, looking into a mirror. It was not vanity which took her there; there was some comfort in the evidence of her physical sufficiency, and a glass had become a mechanical resort when she was troubled; but her mind was occupied, and she

scarçely knew that she was looking at herself. If only he had asked something less of her! She could have given him so much love. But he did not care for that—human love—he was an Englishman. At least, he had schooled himself into thinking it was based in evil. He would have liked her, she knew, to feel that her wifely complacence was something of a sacrifice, bravely offered upon the altar of duty, to be repaid by the joy of motherhood. He wished of her just so much as, and no more than, would serve to people his house. That was to be her life, if she yielded to him: no active pleasures, no positive, delirious, moving joys, but tender care, sumptuous surroundings, still love and steadfast indulgence, in order that she should bring forth children with a minimum of disquiet. Oh, she could not—could not—*could not!*

She turned impatiently from her reflection in the mirror and snatched up her cigarette case. As she was opening it, the footman returned to remove the coffee cups.

Aimée closed the case without taking out a cigarette. "Charles, get me on to nine-nough-six-nought, Western, will you?"

The man went away, and returned presently to say she was connected. She glided out of the room in front of him, humming softly, and went to the telephone.

"Are you nine-nought-six-nought, Western?.... Is that Mr. Bruton?....Is that you, Brue?.... Yes....Yes....I want you to take me somewhere. ....Anywhere—a music-hall, if you like....To-night, yes—now....Oh-h!....Come round and talk to me, then....You can't paint at night.... Well, do them to-morrow....That's what you always say. Why do you drive it so late?....I wouldn't draw for papers that couldn't wait.... Very ill....Gone to the House....I hate you.... What?....Say it again; I can't hear....Oh!.... Oh, that doesn't matter....Yes, all right; yes, I'll come....Half an hour....Not so much as I did....I'll tell you when I come."

She snapped back the earpiece and crossed the hall.

"Get me a taxi, Charles," she called to the footman, as she passed, and then went quickly up the stairs, sylph-like, serene, a soft sheen of floating gold.

She returned in a few minutes wrapped in a black satin cloak with a white lace hood over her head. She gave an address in Rutland Gate to the butler, who put her into the cab, but when the driver had started she leaned forward and told him to take her to Campbell Street, Paddington. Here she was deposited at the entrance to a small block of flats which opened between a fruiterer's and a tobacco-

nist's. The building she entered was composed of but three stories: the ground floor was the fruiterer's shop, the first an ordinary flat, and the second the studio to which she was bound. As she was ascending the steps, she met a man coming down. He was tall and slight, and was descending quickly and lightly, but not hurriedly. Aimée took in at a glance, even in the dim light, that his face was intellectual and that his hands were white and shapely. The stairs were rather narrow, but he did not stop at a landing to let her go by. He slipped nimbly past her—immersed in his thoughts—and in three seconds the sound of his footsteps was lost, as he completed the descent and turned into the street.

Aimée stopped for a moment and looked back at him with some resentment. She thought she was annoyed because the black satin cloak had been brushed unceremoniously. What really troubled her was that the dark eyes and the warm, red lips and the soft complexion, enclosed by the white hood, had not been noticed.

It was the sentiment of a second. The next moment both the feeling and the incident which had caused it were forgotten, and she was lightly continuing her upward course, humming a tune. The door at the top of the flight was open. She slid gayly in, and through some curtains beyond into the studio, still humming, and executed a dainty *pas*

seul in the middle of the floor, with a flash of underskirts and a momentary display of shapely limbs in gossamer silk hose.

Then she threw herself down upon a settee. "Oh, dear, I'm so happy!" she cried.

A young man was standing at an easel, painting in black and white—a smallish, brown-complexioned man, well set up and well groomed. He had a neat dark mustache and a shrewd, humorous eye.

Aimée's striking mode of entry appeared to afford him no surprise.

"Try that dance again," he said, "and retain the pose for a minute or two."

"No; you've seen enough."

"Well, what's the matter to-night?"

"How do you know there is anything the matter?"

"For one thing, you have just said you were happy."

"Oh, well!"—Aimée got up and took off her cloak and hood, threw them rather viciously on a chair, and dropped back into her seat—"oh, well, Chester is so trying! He wants me to have a million children."

"That's rather a large order," said Burton, without discontinuing his painting. "I think it's unreasonable."

"Isn't it fatuous and brutal?"

"I think he ought to be satisfied with a dozen," admitted the painter.

"I can't spend my life having children."

"I don't know why you married."

"I've had *one,*" she said, with plaintive appeal.

"Yes, and a tolerable fuss you made about it!"

"I didn't, Brue. And it's absurd for a man to talk. Life is unlivable: you can't do anything or go anywhere."

"Can't you? You could come here."

"Oh, you don't matter! You are a sort of vice-husband."

"What are the precise rights and privileges of a vice-husband?" asked Brue.

"To be pleasant and comforting, and sometimes to tell the truth in a nice way, and not to make you feel you must always be on a pedestal, and not to want to make love."

"Supposing he wants to, but doesn't do it?"

"That would be better still." She stretched herself along the settee and leaned with her elbows on the end nearest to him. "But *do* you?"

"That's rather a useful pose," said Bruton, looking at her. "I think I can make something of it. Just stay like that for a few minutes." He removed his painting from the easel and fixed on it a clean sheet of pasteboard. "If I can manage this, it will be the last, and then I can talk to you."

"But *do* you, Brue?"

"The witness declined to answer."

"Then I sha'n't pose," said Aimée. She sat up and resumed her old position.

"Oh, yes, you will—no tantrums." He picked up some long sheets of printer's proof and looked through them. "Every story I get to illustrate is sillier than the last. Listen to this—no, we haven't time." He whisked over a sheet. "'Do you really think I'm nice?' she asked. We might illustrate that. Sit in the corner of the settee, and look as if you were asking me if I really think you're nice."

"But you've painted me so often."

"Never mind; you are always effective. One knee over the other, the point of a shoe—well, a little more—and a hint of white frilling. That's very good. They don't mind how often you give them the same thing. Now tell me how the love affairs are getting on. Any more scalps?" He stood at arm's length from the easel, and made some measurements with a pencil, looking quickly from Aimée to the pasteboard and back again.

"They're rather tiresome," said Aimée.

"It gets hold too deep sometimes? They get silent and jealous, and that's dull, isn't it? Besides, it takes such a big knock to lay them out, and that's hard work. Don't move; I'm going to sketch you in. Have you any more letters to show me?"

"Not here. Brue, I never showed you any letters."

"There was the fellow who said you haunted his pillow and got in front of his shaving glass, so that he cut his chin."

"Oh, that was Beresford," said Aimée. "But he's such a dear, really. I wish——"

"You hadn't done it?"

"Oh, sometimes."

"The executioner occasionally feels a pang, then. Doesn't it ever get at all tedious?"

"What?"

"The whole thing."

"Studying people?"

Bruton laughed.

"What a donkey you are!" cried Aimée, a little pungently. "You talk in that silly, cynical way, when you know perfectly well that it is the only thing which saves us from being driven mad with tedium. A world all men or all women would be a world all screaming lunatics in six months."

"Well, pronounced melancholics, perhaps. Still, a little sameness?"

"Oh, you dingy philosopher, that's just what there isn't. Everyone is different: each has his special little ways and his special little characteristics. Even if they are fools, they are different kinds of fools."

"I see—'some do it this way, and some do it that way.' Now, truly"—he had sketched in her figure, and was mixing paint on his palette—"where do you draw the line?"

"At the proper place."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. Oh, Brue, I couldn't."

"Why not? Lots of them do."

"I know, but—— Have you enlisted with the dear old thing who wears horns and a tail?"

"On the contrary, I'm one of the scouts on the watch for him. If you hadn't sworn to a clean sheet, I should have given you a lecture, a long one."

"Then, if those are your methods, I don't think he'll have much trouble in eluding your vigilance, silly Brue!"

"You've not been touched as yet, that's the truth. But you are deliberately drawing fire, and, unless you take to cover, somebody will pick you off." He approached the easel. "Now, look at me and say, 'Do you really think I'm nice?' . . . As nice as a beam of moonlight through the trees on the other side of the river. Did you meet a man as you were coming up?"

"Yes," said Aimée—"a beast."

"Really!" He stopped working for a moment and looked at her. "He can paint, though."

"He can't behave."

"What did he do?"

"Just nothing. He didn't even wait to let me pass."

"Oh, he's always in the clouds. He never sees anybody. That's the artistic incivility. He's full of imagination, and he can paint like blazes."

"So can you, but you—you——"

"Notice if people are nice?"

"Sometimes."

"That's a severe indictment, if you only knew it. If I were a genuine artist, I should only notice if people were paintable, not if they were nice. I should be able to do a nude without knowing it was a nude. If you'll undertake not to tell anyone, I'll admit that the divine afflatus is not with me. I've got a rough reputation as an illustrator, and I can get good prices, but I know a little bit more about dressing a fly to tempt a trout than I do about tone values. Some of them say I can only turn out one type of woman."

"And that's the wrong type. I sha'n't sit any more," cried Aimée, jumping up.

"Get *back,* you little firefly. You'll ruin the whole thing."

She came behind him and looked at the picture. "Brue, am I really as pretty as that?"

"Rather prettier. Now, will you go back?"

"I don't think you've got my hair quite right. My new maid says it's a more glossy black than any she ever touched."

"So I'm going to make it; but how can I, when you're standing here?"

Aimée picked up each side of her skirts in light fingers, and danced back to her seat with a flutter of silks, again humming an air. "Oh, I *am* kind to you, Brue," she asserted, as she dropped into the corner of the settee.

"You are a model who needs to be studied," said Brue, enigmatically.

"Why do you say you can't paint? Your pictures are always interesting."

"They are too interesting; that's the trouble. Problem groups and stories in oil are not art. One ought to be able to paint a field of daisies or an old man playing a fiddle, and make it get home by its simple appeal to the sense of beauty and truth. I've got a tolerable command of technique, but there's nothing behind it. My heart is not quite in the business. If Nature had had her way, I should be a jockey or a light-weight boxer. But Howard Keith is the real thing."

"Oh!"

"You've heard of him?"

"Of course I have. Was he the man I met on the stairs?"

"Yes. He lives at Richmond, but he has taken a studio in Sefton Street lately—just round the corner—and he often sleeps there. His wife has the domestic bump, and he hasn't—there's the rub. She and the children rather rattle his nerves. You can't paint when your costumes get stolen to play shop with, and when a fluttering mother comes into the studio every half hour to ask if the doctor ought to come to see somebody's throat, or if you'll go into the park to see what has happened to somebody else."

"She ought to have married Chester," said Aimée. "He would love trotting after the doctor."

"Yes; but Keith oughtn't to have married *you*."

"I wouldn't look at him. But why not?"

"He wouldn't pay you half enough attention."

"Wouldn't he?" Aimée stretched languidly.

"Pose, please. I think you must meet Howard Keith. It will do you good."

"Does he pretend to hate women?"

"He doesn't see them: he forgets they are there."

"He sounds rather interesting."

"Worth powder and shot?"

"Didn't he paint 'The Strolling Players'?"

"That got him his 'A.'; but it's his Salon picture, 'The Sinners,' that breaks my heart."

"What is it?"

"Two figures—a man and a woman—sitting

together. There's nothing suggestive in their attitudes. But, through the consummate art of the painter, the thought in their minds is laid so bare that the Academy couldn't hang it. I know they apologized, and shouldered the public with the usual blame. There's nothing revolting in it—there's the genius of the man, the danger, if you like—it's just enchanting, beautiful."

"I should like to see it."

"You'll have to go to the Luxembourg to do that. The French Government bought it and sent it there. It's finer, really, than the well-known Italian picture, because the old master gets adventitious aid of a significant grouping."

"What Italian picture?"

"You don't know it?"

"No."

"Not the Italian picture in the National Gallery?"

"No."

"It's the most moving thing that was ever hung in a public gallery. The miracle is that it's in an English gallery."

"Is it a nude?"

"Oh, Lord, no!"

"What is it, then?"

"Oh, go and see it."

Aimée was silent for a few moments. "And this

man, you say, doesn't see women—forgets they are there?"

"Yes; it's an interesting combination, isn't it? Would you like to meet him?"

She dropped her eyes, and then looked up slowly, with all their powers directed upon him, glowing from their darkness. "I shouldn't mind."

"What you mean is that you intend to meet him?"

She made no reply.

"A man who can paint an erotic picture and ignore women! Think of the piquancy! You are not going to miss that?"

"No, I'm not," she said, honestly.

"And you'll keep up the pressure until the poor devil commits himself in some way, and then you'll be satisfied." For the first time, he spoke a little bitterly. "By that time, unless he is an experienced man of the world and a hardened sinner into the bargain, he will probably be in love with you. But will you care? Not you! You'll fly away to the next new enterprise. Don't move your head."

"You're a pig," said Aimée, "and I don't love you any more."

He painted for some minutes in silence. Suddenly she sprang up. "You've got to have finished now," she decreed, "because I must go."

Then she went up to him. "You are not just, Brue," she said, a little reproachfully. "I know I'm

pleasure-loving and fond of men and all that, and I try to make them fond of me—why shouldn't I?—but I'm better than you think."

"Well, what do you think of the picture?"

"It's sweet. She's a darling. I'm sure he doesn't say cruel things to her."

"Not he; he falls into all the traps and gets himself a life sentence."

"What a duffer you are, Brue! You pose as a cynic, and think I can't see through you. You are as fond of women as you can be. If I wanted to, I could make you kiss me."

"That's not part of the duties of a vice-husband." He added some finishing touches to the painting.

"Sometimes it's permitted, if there's nobody better, and he hasn't said objectionable things," said Aimée. "Will you come to Brackett for Christmas? I mean, you *must* come, because, unless you do, I shall die of stagnation."

"I thought you had a man down there?"

"Oh, Bertie Legard! He's rather a dear, but he's frightfully fatuous and a terrible bore. He's hopelessly in love, but he only talks to me about bull puppies."

"Evidently an advanced stage. When is Christmas?"

"Oh, I don't know—I never count. Christmas means Brackett and desperation. Chester says we

are going down when the House rises. Do they stop the autumn session for Christmas, or do they put Christmas at the end of the autumn session?" She picked up the white hood and tied it on. "You can find out; but don't leave me too long with Bertie Legard."

Bruton put the cloak round her. She caught his hands and looked up over her shoulder. "Do you love me, Brue?"

"That's not a starter," said Brue.

"Tell me in ordinary English."

"I never think,"

"Why not?"

"You are married."

"That's not the reason."

He looked down into her eyes. "You cruel little thing! Who is to stake anything on a woman of your restless moods—an angel to-day, a devil to-morrow, a stoic on Friday, and a baby all the time?"

She sprang away lightly and made for the stairs.

"Oh, well! . . . Come and get me a taxi."

Chapter III

AIMÉE was late and Hughes consequently was a little restless. She was always late for lunch on Sunday at Brackett, and Hughes was always a little restless. Everyone was waiting, even Bertie Legard. The Rev. Joseph Hitch and Mrs. Hitch, Bruton and Nell Legard were all conscious that Aimée was late and that Hughes was restless.

The latter's Sundays at his country house were carefully regulated, and anything which broke the quiet flow of the routine disturbed him. The remaining six days of the week were subject in their disposal to manifold chances, but the Sundays were ordered upon a plan as unvarying as the intervals which divided them. Twice—in the morning and in the evening—black-coated and tall-hatted, he walked across his park to the little church; twice he walked back. He read the lessons, emerging for the purpose, with subdued tread, from his ancestral pew; he acted as church warden, and handed the almsbag along the files of pews, moving slowly from row to row. This was not prompted by a

prudent desire to please his tenants and constituents, but was the outcome of simple, unostentatious religious feeling. He was the main support of the church at Brackett—whose living had originally been in his gift, but which, with characteristic modesty, he had handed over to the bishop of the diocese—and opened his purse freely to the Vicar's applications. He occupied the large pew in solitary state. Aimée did not accompany him. She was a Catholic, and, since there was no Catholic church at Brackett, her Sundays were usually spent (failing more stimulating society) in the company of Bertie Legard.

The Sunday lunch at the Hall was an unchanging feature. Three or four local people were always invited, and generally came. Usually Hughes brought them back with him from the morning service across the park. He would show them through his greenhouses, discuss the Alpine plants in his rock-garden, and at one o'clock steer them into the drawing-room to meet Aimée and the house party.

Aimée, however, was accustomed to throw the clockwork a little out of gear by her failure to be present at the indicated moment. To-day—the first Sunday after Christmas—the party waiting for her was typical of a long chain of such parties; Bruton, for the time being the only visitor at the Hall,

dressed in a blue suit, and looking the pink of health; Legard, a neighboring landowner, strikingly attired in riding breeches and coat and a white stock; his sister Nell; and the Vicar and his wife. The only members of this group who had not been to church were Bruton and Bertie Legard.

The exterior characteristics of the latter were a straight and strong physique, well-cut features, immaculately shaven lips, and a grave and dignified air. His dark hair was brushed smoothly back, and there was invariably a clean and fresh look about him, as if he had just been washing himself. Seen in repose, he appeared a man of cultured mind, perhaps of some scholarship. It was only when he opened his lips and committed himself to ineptitudes with the manner of a Socrates that one appreciated —with something of a shock—his intellectual plane. Born to a position which promised an easy future, he had spent three years at Cambridge without any thought of taking a degree, had studied law without any expectation of being called to the Bar, had succeeded to his patrimony early, and eventually had reached the age of eight-and-twenty without having achieved any mental equipment. Generous, good-hearted, and capable of unselfish impulses and acts, he betted a little, rode a little, farmed a little, talked a little too much, and generally did little things in a little careless way.

Hughes objected to him—as much as his gentle nature could object to anyone—not because of his attentions to his wife, but because of his inattention to Sunday morning service and his unorthodox conception of Sabbath raiment. In a man whose position demanded a fitting example these laxities appeared to Hughes peculiarly flagrant. His presence among the lunch party to-day, and at many similar functions, was due, not to himself, but to his sister. Nell Legard was a dark-eyed, dark-complexioned, dark-haired girl (she was still called a girl, though she had passed her thirtieth birthday), subdued and unassertive in her manner, good-natured and self-sacrificing, quietly and sincerely interested in religious work and observance. She held, unobtrusively but firmly, very definite views on moral and spiritual questions, and had conspired with Hughes in many movements for the welfare and religious life of the local community. She presided at charity teas, held stalls at bazaars, read Dickens at Mothers' Meetings, weekly renewed the flowers and cleaned the vases on the altar at the church. People whispered, in their kindly way, that it had been a disappointment to her when, after two years' absence, Hughes had returned to the Hall with his fascinating French bride. If that were so, there was nothing to indicate it in their relations, which continued on the same intimate

footing, sustained by the same bond of mutual work and interests.

To-day they had walked together from the church, followed by the couple from the Parsonage at an interval which represented the time required to remove a surplice and count the offertory. The Rev. Joseph Hitch was a breezy little man, with a flat face and flat hair, which was parted in the middle, and appeared to finish off too early over the temples. He had a habit, when he was going to speak, of screwing his body about and hitching up his shoulders like a trussed fowl; and his small eyes pointedly avoided his listener. He enjoyed a reputation as a raconteur, and lost no opportunity to gratify his friends. His stories were introduced without interval upon the last word of a previous speaker, and they did not always flow with any marked continuity of thought from the observations that had preceded them. Some of them rather troubled Hughes; but issuing, as they did, from clerical lips, he felt it would not become him to appear otherwise than edified.

The moments before an expected meal, especially when the hostess is late and the host is fidgety, do not lend themselves amiably to story-telling; but Mr. Hitch was doing his best to relieve the slight tension by a spirited rendering of the tale concluding, "You will find water in your bedroom."

It fell a trifle flat. "Had him there!" Bertie Legard kindly said. He was leaning with his back upon the broad mantel, a position which kept him warm, but deprived the remaining members of the party of their full share of the great wood fire. Suddenly he switched round to his nearest neighbor.

"I say, Mrs. Hitch, have you seen my new mare?" He compressed his lips when he had put the question, and looked a little aggressive and very profound.

Mrs. Hitch was a somewhat elegant woman—sufficiently tall to overtop her husband by several inches—who was still called a bride, though she had been married nearly two years.

Before she could reply, Hughes got up. "I *think*, perhaps," he began, in his slow and careful phraseology, "my wife cannot know——"

"It's all right," said Bertie Legard, turning round and again getting his back to the fire. "We tried luging down Plover Hill, and it didn't work. A root of a tree or a stone or a block of wood, I don't know what. Anyhow, we had a spill. She has gone to change her dress."

Hughes's horror at this method of occupying Sunday morning was covered by his concern for his wife. "She is not hurt?"

"Oh, no—no damage done. But snow's wet at this time of year." The expression on his face,

suggesting a considerable contribution to contemporary thought, was again accompanied by the rigid tightening of his lips. He took a chocolate from a large box he had discovered, and put it in his mouth.

"It's rather trying to everybody else," said his sister, "to see you eating so many chocolates before lunch."

"One must stave off the pangs," said Bertie, sapiently. "Have a chocolate, Mrs. Hitch?"

"In that case," proceeded Hughes, resuming his seat, "we can only regret the little accident and wait with patience. The church, I thought, looked particularly beautiful this year, Mrs. Hitch."

"Didn't it! But that's thanks to the plundering of your conservatories and to Miss Legard's hard work. She practically did it all."

"I don't think you can call it hard work," said Nell, "when it's something you love doing. If I were to slide down Plover Hill to amuse Bertie, I should think I had been working very hard."

"That's what I thought," said Bruton, "the only time I undertook the floral treatment of a church. It was a harvest festival, and I was up in Lancashire. I had a design of my own, and got *carte blanche* from the vicar. I wish you had been there to see the effect, Colonel Hughes. It was striking. I

dragged all the reporters there and got a good advertisement. Oh, here she is!"

Aimée had floated into the room—calm and noiseless, without any appearance of haste, as a sea-bird floats on the face of quiet waters—in a gown whose perfect taste and unstudied art made the other women immediately dowdy. Her gowns gave the effect of being part of her; there was no hardness or artificiality; they followed the flexible lines of her figure, and yielded with her movements. You did not see a dress elaborately concocted and fitted with care; you saw a woman, and knew that the whole of her was in harmony.

"Am I late? I'm so sorry," she said.

"No, no, my dear," said Hughes, quickly. "We were talking about the—er—dec-or-a-tions."

"Were they nice?" She crossed the room to the big fire and put a foot on the brass fender.

"Mr. Bruton was telling us," proceeded Hughes, "of a little scheme he himself had carried out in a church in *Lan*-cashire."

Aimée partly turned her head and looked at the little artist. "You sinner!" she threw at him in an undertone.

She dipped her hand into the big chocolate box, then scrutinized the interior with disapproval. "Who has been eating all my chocolates?"

"I had one," said Bertie.

"Or two," said Bruton.

"You've had at least two dozen," said Aimée, counting the remains. "This is the last box but two, and now I shall hardly have enough to last till I go back to London. I won't luge with you any more."

"No worse for the spill?" asked Bruton.

"We didn't have a spill. I don't know what you mean."

"I thought you had been luging down Plover Hill and ended in the snow."

"We came off before we got to the bottom. One always does. That's part of the fun."

Mr. Hitch contorted himself and looked at the carpet. "Every form of sport has its misfortunes," he said, by way of introduction, and then gave the story ending "No, give up the meenistry."

Lunch was announced and Aimée fled on the word, humming a little as she crossed the hall with the other women.

"What a dull place Brackett is!" she said, as she took her place at the table. "How many will you give me in a hundred up this afternoon, Brue?"

"Curried prawns will do for me," said Bertie, and looked severely across the table, as if the butler's question had been a personal affront.

"I think——" began Hughes, tentatively. "I don't know if you have considered, Kitty——"

"I'm so frightfully bored by everything," said Aimée. "I should have to take Bertie, if I didn't, or teach Brue to draw pigs blindfold. What do you think about billiards on Sunday, Mr. Hitch?"

Mr. Hitch screwed himself round and looked sideways at a bowl of chrysanthemums. "It is a matter of personal feeling. We should avoid employing labor on Sundays," he said, helping himself from a dish of scalloped eggs which the footman handed him; "but, apart from that, such questions must be left to individual sentiment." He inflated himself in jerks when he spoke, and each syllable was neatly pronounced.

"What about golf caddies?" said Bertie, with a little sapient wag of his head, looking at him with his lips even more tightly compressed than usual, as if he had propounded a thorny problem in metaphysics.

"What about making a man draw pigs blindfold?" asked Bruton. "Isn't that employing labor?"

"You ask me too many conundrums," said the Vicar, facetiously. By his jerky inflations he appeared to produce his words half a tone deeper than his natural note.

"The honorable member must give notice of that question, I *think*," Hughes interposed, lightly.

"I beg to move the adjournment of the House,"

said Bruton, "to call attention to a definite matter of public urgent importance—namely, the proposal to employ an overworked artist to draw pigs on Sunday."

"We shall require a synod," said Mr. Hitch, examining the petals of the nearest chrysanthemum; and, having thus brought ecclesiastical dignitaries into the field, deftly led up to the story concluding: "The Lord, my boy, with the hot water."

"I say, Colonel Hughes," said Bertie, "have you seen my new mare?"

"A brown filly with a white fetlock?" said Hughes. He gave a characteristic little laugh. "I saw her, did I not, on Tuesday?" He was grateful to Bertie for having relieved him from the necessity of recognising the Vicar's story.

"Everybody has seen her," said Nell Legard, laughing, "and everybody is tired of talking of her."

"Ah, that is only a sister's opinion," said Hughes, with a smile.

"Well, you see, she has been the staple topic of conversation ever since she came," said Nell, "and that was more than a fortnight ago."

"Would you like to make a sketch of her, Bruton?" asked the owner, with impressive generosity, quite unmoved.

"Any fee?" asked Bruton, lightly.

"Oh, no"—in the same tone. "I should like a

copy—that's all. She's a fine animal." He directed a level gaze at the opposite wall, fully conscious of having delivered a weighty statement.

"You should ask him to do *you,*" said Aimée. "With a toga and a laurel wreath, you would make a wonderful Greek poet. He has got all the lines, hasn't he?" she said to Bruton, in a semi-undertone. "You would never suspect, from the appearance of him, he was such a"—she bent to her neighbor and whispered the last word with a little grimace—"noodle," and immediately flashed a smile at Bertie.

She allowed the conversation to sway for a time to her husband's end of the table, and leaned back in her high-backed armchair, her small, elegant, ultra-modern figure piquantly contrasted with its heavy old carving. It occurred to her, looking round, that they were a curiously assembled company. Except, perhaps, Chester and Nell Legard, there were no two of them with ideas in common; there was no one of them who could have seen from the points of view of any other. And the most exotic, the most strangely placed person among this essentially British party, was herself. Her thoughts wandered slowly back over the processes that had brought her there. Her childhood had been very differently environed—spent partly in her English father's house in Bordeaux and partly in Paris, among her mother's friends; people, as she remembered them,

rather Bohemian, and very happy and light and careless. Then her mother had died, and when she was sixteen her father had brought her to live in England. As the years passed, she grew gradually to see that both his financial position and his health were precarious, and that her personal way out of an uncertain future lay through a handsome marriage. Though compelled by an undowered birth to seek his fortune in the wine trade, her father was well born, and had artistic tastes. His blood secured her the entrée to the best houses; her mother's charm and vivacity brought her the homage of many men. She was in no doubt, during that period, of what she wanted. She wanted means; but she wanted also a husband whom she at least liked, and who was sufficiently amiable and easy-going to treat her indulgently and to allow her reasonable freedom to live her own life. Eventually she met Chester Hughes, and the more she saw of him, the more exactly he appeared to fulfill these various requirements. So she had contrived that Chester Hughes should find her desirable; and here she was, in the carved armchair at the foot of his table.

As she came out of her reverie, she looked across at him.

He was gazing anxiously at Nell Legard's plate. "Are you sure that pear is a good one?" he asked. "Won't you try another?"

"A curate was breakfasting with a bishop——" began Mr. Hitch.

Chapter IV

NELL LEGARD'S dark eyes looked quietly across at Hughes. I'm sure you are worried," she said.

"Ah—a little." He spoke with slightly uneasy haste, to get away from a personal subject. "But let us continue our talk about your doings here. You have told me nothing about the dogs."

They were sitting in the library. Aimée had no use for the two feminine members of the lunch party, and had left them quite unceremoniously, after the meal, to amuse herself in the billiard-room with Bruton and Bertie. She had no intention to act discourteously to her guests. Simply they did not interest her—she found them dull—and she did not trouble to get to know them, or to understand their points of view. She did not see that Nell Legard was a woman of graceful manner and cultured mind, whose tastes were true and whose perceptions were acute; that she dressed well and looked attractive; and that, moreover, she could feel deeply, and had unusual capacity for sympathy and loyalty. She saw in her simply a provincial spinster, wrapped up in Church and domestic affairs—interests which

did not appeal to her in the least. The couple from the Parsonage had hurried away to their Sunday afternoon duties, so that Nell was now left alone with her host.

She looked at him a little pensively, and then smiled. "Am I no longer to be trusted?"

"Hum, hum!" Hughes made a little vocal sound peculiarly his own, which expressed neither assent nor dissent, but was used to fill gaps.

"You used to tell me about your troubles. Something has gone wrong in the House, perhaps? You are disappointed, apprehensive?"

"No, no."

"In the constituency?"

"I am told by my agent that the feeling is veering. He does not consider the seat incon-*test*-ably safe."

"Is that all?"

Hughes smiled. "I should be sorry to become one of the un-em-ployed." His careful enunciation never varied: his voice ran always in a clear, easy, orderly tenor.

"Is that all, Chester? You have looked troubled since you came down this time, and I don't like to see you look like that. You forget sometimes when you are talking, but it comes back. Is it because you are worrying about your seat?"

Hughes did not immediately reply. "Your intuition is right, Nell," he said at last. "I am a little preoccupied just now, apart from the agent's report. It is nothing, I hope, of more than temporary moment. I cannot tell you any more. You must not feel hurt. If it were possible to confide in anyone, I should choose you. But there are things so particularly, so essentially personal that even the most trusted confidante must be excluded."

Nell's look of quiet concern did not change. She had not put her questions from idle curiosity, but because she knew that, whatever might be the cause of his distress, not the least of its weight would come from the necessity to bear it alone. It was impossible for her to avoid perceiving that, however delightful a sunshine companion she might be, Aimée's nature contained no harbourage to which a husband could retreat for consolation or encouragement when he was in trouble; that she lacked the quality which would instinctively invite a husband to confide his troubles. It had not, indeed, occurred to her hitherto that the origin of Hughes's anxiety might lie in Aimée herself; but his last words now put the thought into her mind.

"Of course I am not hurt," she said. "I only wanted to help, if I could. I know it is

sometimes a relief to have someone to talk to when one is worried. You don't suspect me of curiosity or interference, do you?"

"No, no"—quickly.

"Will you let me say just one thing?"

"Well?" He looked at her with his slightly indulgent smile.

"If you are troubling about—well, about what is going on now, for instance, I don't think you need."

Hughes did not immediately grasp her meaning. "Are you thinking of Kit-ty?" he asked, after a pause.

"Yes. Don't be angry. I've known you so long, haven't I?—ever since I was a tiny little girl and you were a big boy at school, who carried me out on your shoulder to see the hounds meet. And I do so want to lift whatever may be weighing on your mind. A woman sees her own sex from a different point of view from a man. Aimée is young and light-hearted; things appeal to her which don't appeal to you or to me. I'm sure you needn't feel anxious."

Hughes was not offended. He smiled. "Your good heart has taken you very much astray, Nell," he said. "I have sometimes been interested to notice how very far we may go astray when it is necessary to start, in some measure, from pre-

sumption. Now, I am very glad that Kitty should bring into her life all the brightness she can. Her friends are my friends. I think a husband's care should be to sustain and guard his wife, but not to check the natural ebullitions of her spirit. And now let us talk about the dogs."

Nell was puzzled. She felt little doubt, from his disinclination to speak of it, that his trouble was in some way connected with his wife; yet she knew he was incapable of misleading her by deliberately fallacious statements. At least, it was not Aimée's irresponsible habits which gave him concern. What, then, was the nature of the rift which had recently opened between them?

She wished Aimée had tried to understand her, and given her more of her friendship, so that she might have the means of possibly helping him through her. She knew there were things a man cannot disclose which a woman can and does. She knew there were difficulties a woman can solve for a woman which a man's blunter susceptibilities fail to appreciate. There had been nothing in Aimée's manner, however, to give much colour to the supposition that her mind was troubled.

"Did you notice any change in Aimée?" she asked her brother on the way home.

"Change? Oh lord, no!" replied Bertie. "She

knows something about luging. I wish they would come with us to Les Avants. I'd take a short price that I got her down inside record. I mentioned it to Hughes, and he said it would be 'very nice.' You know his way."

"They couldn't, Bertie," said his sister. "The House will be sitting."

"What pifflers!" said Bertie.

The next day Bruton concluded his visit to Brackett. As he was sitting, waiting for the car, before the great hall fire, talking to Aimée—who had just come down, clad in furs, to go with him to the station—the morning post arrived, and a letter was handed to him. A gratified smile came into his brown eyes, as he read it, and his white teeth showed beneath his dark mustache.

"Do I seem to you to be swelling visibly?" he asked.

"Is it that belated 'A.'?"

"Never heard of it: it isn't in the running," said Bruton. "This is from Howard Keith."

"Let me read it," said Aimée, suddenly becoming interested. She stretched out her hand, and he passed her the letter. "Yes, I thought he would write like this," she observed, surveying it with disapproval—"small and scarcely legible—celebrities always do."

"It's part of the business," said Bruton. "No

one would believe in the brains of a man who wrote a good round hand."

Aimée read the letter aloud:

"DEAR BRUTON,

"I am rather changing my mind about the picture after all. I am beginning to think that your theory of a darker background will bring out the value of the central idea. Anyhow, I'm trying it experimentally. When you come back, will you come and have a look at it, if you have time?

"HOWARD KEITH."

Aimée waited a moment, apparently thinking; then she put her elbow on the arm of her chair and her chin on her hand, and looked at Bruton with her most intent air. "Did the man who wrote that letter *really* paint that picture?"

"Which? 'The Sinners'?"

Aimée nodded.

"You show an unholy interest in it," said Bruton. "It seems to me a man has only to take licence to bring all the women to his feet. I can't understand why anyone troubles to be a hypocrite."

"I'm interested in his work altogether," she answered, quite seriously. "He is a man with a future."

"Then why do you pick out for special inquiry a picture you have never seen, and which is hardly known in this country?"

"Well, you told me about it, and one likes people to be independent."

Bruton laughed. "I see you are in the mood of not giving anything away to-day. Shall we get down to the idea underneath?"

"I don't want you to have a wrong impression, if I care to meet him."

"So you have been graciously considering it?"

"Don't be horrid, Brue!"

"Be honest, then. What colour are you running in?"

"Black, I think," said Aimée; "it suits me, with silver underneath when I turn the skirt, like a butterfly's underwing."

"Very suitable," remarked Bruton. "But I don't know that you are entitled to call yourself a dark horse."

"This is Monday, isn't it?" Aimée reflected. "We go back to London on Wednesday week. Friday would do?"

"What for, exactly?"

"For you to ask him to tea to meet me."

Bruton was considerably tickled. "My dear, he wouldn't come."

Aimée bridled. "Wouldn't come!"

"He wouldn't go out of his way to meet Cleopatra—unless he thought he could get her to sit for him."

"I don't understand," said Aimée, with great hauteur.

"It's quite simple," replied Bruton, with the air of a pedagogue patiently resolving a difficulty for rather a dull pupil. "To go running away to tea means more or less wasting an afternoon's work. If he were to do that for everyone who has the curiosity to see him, he would have to stop painting and set up as a drawing-room exhibit."

"But it would be different with—with you. You are a friend of his."

"Perhaps I am, but if I were to send him a polite invitation to take tea with me at four o'clock on Friday, he would probably look upon it as a sufficiently provocative act to break diplomatic relations."

"Give some other reason," said Aimée, becoming earnest. "Ask him to come and advise about a picture. He would come for that."

"Yes, any time from ten to ten, any day for a week. Do you want to camp in my studio?"

"Then make an excuse to fix a time. You could."

"Oh, could I!"

"Try, Brue"—then, a little more softly, "for *me*."

Bruton was quite wide awake, but the deep personal gaze of her dark eyes was something sufficiently desirable to prolong. "So you really want to meet the man who painted 'The Sinners'?"

"Um-m."

"Really?"

She looked round quickly and then bent even closer. "Um-m."

"You little humbug! Well, I'll try."

She put her lips to his ear and whispered—not facetiously, but with every semblance of expressing a genuine sentiment—"Darling!"

The hall doors were opened and the car was announced. They went out together. As they stood for a moment on the steps, a horse's hoofs, which had been padding over the beaten snow, crunched loudly on the swept gravel in front of the house. Bertie Legard dismounted and came up to them.

After shaking hands with Aimée, he turned to Bruton with a grave air, holding his horse. "I say, Bruton, have you seen my new mare?"

"Another new mare?" said Bruton.

"I've had her a week. Come and have a look at her."

"The train leaves at ten-forty," said the little artist. "No time to do her justice."

Bertie looked at the car, where a footman had just placed the departing visitor's bags. "What, going? You rotter!"

"I agree with you," said Bruton, as he got in; "but don't let the public know."

Bertie assumed the air of proud nonchalance becoming the well-bred dawg. "*And* your Club is?"

"Then make an excuse to fix a time. You could."

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and pleasant-featured, and her eyes, turned calmly to the opening door, expressed only verified presumption. The husband walked with the miner's stoop, and was covered with coal-dust, but there was neither dejection nor gladness in his face; simply the indifferent look of a man in habitual circumstances. You were shown a daily scene in a mining district, and were not invited to feel any emotion or to form any opinion.

"You said I was to remind you when it was four o'clock," said the model.

"Four o'clock," repeated Keith, still looking at the picture. "Did I say why?"

"No, you just said, 'Tell me when it is four o'clock—don't forget.'"

"Oh, yes," said Keith, at last turning towards her, and evidently determining to give himself to consideration of the matter in question; "I have to go and see Bruton." He looked at a clock. "Well, it's getting dusky. I shan't want you any more to-day. Can you come to-morrow at ten? Just a moment though. I'll give another touch to that left arm."

He picked up his palette and brushes. The model sat down with a slight inaudible sigh: she knew what Keith's touches could amount to, if he lost himself.

To-day, however, he showed exceptional repression. "That'll do," he said suddenly, turning from the easel and beginning to pack away his bruches. "To-morrow at ten. Goodbye."

A few moments after she had gone he followed her down the stairs. It was scarcely more than two hundred yards to Bruton's studio. He wondered vaguely, as he crossed the road and turned the corner, why the latter had wished him to come and see the picture at this particular hour. By the time he had ascended his fellow-artist's steps, however, and pushed back the curtains which gave him entrance to the studio, he was again thinking about his own picture, and wishing he had kept the model a few minutes longer.

He discovered Bruton leaning with his back to the fire, talking to a woman who was seated on a table, swinging a pair of dainty feet in dainty shoes from beneath the hem of a black velvet gown. He was not surprised to find Bruton talking to such a woman. It did not even occur to him to wonder whether she were a model or a friend. His eyes immediately went past her to the picture on the easel.

This was called "Cutting for Partners," and represented a group, in dress of the Dickens period, standing round a card-table. An elderly

man, of the irascible military type, had drawn a two; a young girl, somewhat conventionally beautiful, had turned a queen. There was a clear suggestion that the former was the father of the latter, and the interest of the picture was expected to come from the feelings of a young man, between whom and the girl you were invited to assume a sentimental attachment, who was standing with his hand on the pack, in the act of drawing a card. A fourth figure, a woman in the background outside the ray of candle-light, was indeterminate. Keith stood in front of it for a time without speaking. He put up his glasses for a moment, and then put them down again.

"What makes you do this kind of thing, Bruton?" he asked calmly.

"It sells," said Bruton plainly.

"They'll hardly hang it."

"I'm taking evens," said Bruton. "The price was a little longer a few days ago—Page laid me eleven to eight in sovereigns—but I've improved the girl's dress since then. I've a fair amount of money on; that's why I wanted you to come and help me to land the odds. There's still something wrong somewhere."

"Somewhere!"

"Oh, the thing's not art," said Bruton jovially. "I don't pretend it is. But I want to get the

technique right. If you've got a pencil, I'll work out what I stand to win."

"It's difficult to understand you," said Keith. He moved a step away from the easel, and sat on the table upon which Aimée was still seated, his back to her back. "You know more about painting than half a dozen men I could name without thinking, and yet you elect to treat it in this humbugging way."

Bruton twisted his trim moustache a little thoughtfully. "Why not, Keith? I'm not a first-class man, and never shall be; I know that as well as you do. What's the good of practising looking solemn when you are never going to play Hamlet?"

"You can draw," said Keith, after a distinct pause. "You've got a wonderful eye for line."

"Yes," said Bruton, smiling a little. He looked from the picture to his fellow-artist. "What's the matter with it?"

"It's this figure that is out of tone," replied Keith, pointing to the young man. "All your colour about here is too hot." He bent a little closer to the canvas. "It's in rather a tacky condition, isn't it? But I think you could work in some cool greys. And I should darken the mass in the centre to bring out the candle-light on the card-table."

"Yes," agreed Bruton. "Yes . . . yes . . . yes. It will be all right then, you think?"

"It will be better," said Keith carefully.

"You needn't be afraid of spreading on the sugar a trifle thicker, if you feel inclined. I'm not in danger of dying of swollen head."

"Well, I shouldn't care to play whist with the old boy," said Keith, with a smile.

"*He's* all right, then. What about the girl?"

"She's well painted, but it's not a good model."

"Hackneyed; but they like them like that."

"Who?" Subtle disrespect was in the softly uttered word.

"The proprietors of the Christmas supplements." Bruton laughed happily, and went round to the fire. "Let me introduce you to Mrs. Hughes. You know Colonel Hughes, do you, of Brackett?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" Keith started up and turned round. He had even forgotten there was a third person in the room.

Aimée sprang from the table with a little swish. "Oh, dear, have you really come back to earth?" There was an arch suggestion of weariness in her manner. "What a terrible thing it must be to be an artist!"

"Really?" Keith smiled.

"To have always to be thinking about pictures. Doesn't it sometimes get rather monotonous?" She

felt in conquering mood: she knew her gown suited her, and that she looked her best.

Keith had been taking in, with æsthetic approval, the graceful outlines of her face and form. "Do you ever sit?" he asked quite calmly, without answering her question.

Some women, perhaps, would have been offended. Aimée immediately appreciated the compliment, all the higher because spontaneous and undesigned. Not the man, but the artist, had perceived her beauty.

"Ever!" she exclaimed. "Where are all those magazines, Brue?"

"They are not particularly creditable to either of us," Bruton demurred.

"Never mind; he won't be happy until he sees them," said Aimée, ingeniously saddling Keith with a curiosity he had not expressed and did not feel, but could not repudiate. With a little graceful backward jump she got again upon the table, and began to hum a tune.

Bruton's studio was very different from Keith's. A few rugs imperfectly covered the floor-space, and all about was a litter of sketches, portfolios, costumes, stacked canvases, odds and ends of armour and painters' properties. After hunting for a time in a corner, Bruton produced a pile of magazines. He opened one at a page containing illustra-

tions, expressed his own slight opinion of what he saw by a humorous twist of his features, and handed it to Keith.

"It's their fault," he said, "not mine."

Keith examined the pages one by one with a look that gathered trouble as he went on. At last he raised his head, and compared the illustration in his hand with Aimée. "So you are Bruton's woman?" he said.

"Sometimes—but not nearly always. Isn't it horrid of him? I'm not really that type one bit. I never make eyes. It's—ugh!—bourgeois."

"It's his own wicked imagination?" said Keith.

"I look at people," she said—looking at him illustratively, as she spoke, with her air of exquisite confidence—"but I never make eyes."

"You have them, though." The artist in him returned her look with critical frankness.

"Would you like to paint them some day?"

"Well, I must study you first."

"I thought you were doing that," said Aimée candidly.

"You see, I must get something more than the outside of a face."

"Surely you don't want to paint my soul? Because I haven't got one," she added.

"The absence of soul is quite paintable, and an

interesting subject," said Keith, again smiling. "Well, we'll say 'character.'"

"Try the same reply," said Bruton, and felt on the mantelpiece for his cigarettes.

Aimée flashed a look at his back which would have been withering but for the involuntary appreciation of his quick wit that got into it. "You are a brute and a coward, because you daren't face me, and I hate you!"

Keith looked at her with a gentle glow of humour in his eyes. "You would rather be without a soul than without a character."

"So would anybody," she averred.

She put her hand into a silver wrist-bag, then looked again at Keith, and withdrew it empty. Her cigarette-case was there, but she wasn't quite sure. Later on, perhaps, when the collar was safely snapped round his neck, and she held the other end of the chain, he might disapprove as much as he liked, she would blow the smoke into his face. But for the present—well, he had a way of standing, as he was standing now, with his head slightly turned and his eyes bent slightly downward, and the dropped lids gave him a thoughtful, rather introspective, rather inscrutable look.

He aroused himself suddenly, with a curious and obvious effort, and immediately picked up his hat.

"I must go. Is that all I can do for you, Bruton?"

"All for the moment," said Bruton, "thank you. You've reduced the odds to five to four *on*. I'll soften that figure, and then get you to come and look at it again. With fair luck and no breakdowns, we shall go to the post at two to one."

"But we haven't arranged about——" Aimée broke out rather hurriedly.

"About what?" Keith stopped.

"Oh, about anything."

He looked mystified. "Was there anything to arrange?"

Aimée jumped down from the table. "No, no, not really. Why do you take me so seriously? I only want to say that I feel very proud to have met you; and may I come and see your pictures one day?"

Keith put up his hand and slowly smoothed back his hair. She noticed that the hand was white and particularly well-shaped. "Yes, of course—any day you like."

"What day? Say on Monday, shall we?"

"Yes—say on Monday."

"Ripping!" exclaimed Aimée.

Her "r's," which had the French ripple, appealed to him. He smiled—almost paternally. "Say that again," he asked.

"R-ripping!" repeated Aimée obediently.

She took a step back and turned her skirts, with a flash of white beneath; and her eyes shone.

Keith paused a moment longer. "You look like some wonderful black butterfly with silver underwings," he said, and then passed through the curtains and down the stairs.

It was her own thought, expressed almost in her own words; yet she was not altogether contented to hear it on his lips, or, for that matter—now that he had gone—with the interview as a whole. Somehow, it seemed to her suddenly, it should have been ordered otherwise. It was not that inadequate homage had been paid to Aimée the enchantress. There were signs, perhaps, that that might come when the skin of the artist had been pierced. It was that Mrs. Hughes, the wife of Colonel Hughes, M.P., the mistress of a house in Mayfair and a country mansion, the *grande dame* of half a county of tenantry had been so conspicuously ignored. As she listened to his footsteps descending the stairs, with the ring of his last words in her ears, she felt that she had been surrendering her dignity. He had treated her as some pretty chorus-girl, some airy, inconsiderable person whom Bruton had drawn to his studio to help the hours along.

Oh, well! She had decided to live light-heartedly; deliberately and of her own choice she had declined

to sit in the stately seats of the mighty. With her own hands she had cast off the irksome chains of office; so why should she expect them to be discovered on her neck?

She threw herself into a chair and lighted a cigarette. "I don't care," she said aloud.

"What?" Bruton sat down beside her.

"I said, I don't care," repeated Aimée.

"Don't care about what?"

"About anything." She blew a cloud of smoke rather viciously.

"That's a trifle wide," said Bruton." "Well, how did the great man strike you?"

"He is too self-centred—wrapped up in his art. He needs humanizing."

"Ten to one you can't do it."

"I'll take the bet," said Aimée.

Chapter VI

THE following day, which was Saturday, Keith went out to Richmond. He often slept at the studio, but unless he happened to be pressed by the approach of sending-in day or by some other cause, he spent at least the week-ends in the bosom of his family. As he entered the hall of his house, at about six in the afternoon, he heard sounds of strife proceeding from the dining-room.

"Be *quiet!*" rang out in his wife's voice, very much raised.

"You're horrid! You're always so cross!" This in a child's voice.

"I'm *not* cross. And if you speak to me in that way, you shall not go to the dance at all."

Recognising the wisdom of avoiding the disturbed area for a time, Keith sat down in a chair in the hall, and waited for the storm to abate. A fire was burning there. He drew his chair to it, and tried to read an evening paper; but, after a short lull, a fresh and more vigorous swell of sound came from the field of combat, and

he dropped the sheet with contracting features and indrawing breath.

Inside the dining-room was a scene of some confusion. A little girl of ten, normally pretty, but at present sour and unprepossessing, attired in a Pompadour costume of flowered chintz, turned up from a blue satin petticoat—complete but for the lack of a few bows—was prancing about in a state of vigorous contumacy. All over the table, and here and there on the floor, were scattered relics of the materials which had gone to make the costume. Mrs. Keith was seated near the fire plying a needle and thread with angry determination. She was a tall and portly woman of forty. Her face reflected a motherly and sympathetic nature. At present it was a little red, for it must be confessed she was in a very bad temper. Deeply affectionate, unselfish and generous, she frequently had to pay the penalty, as she was doing now, of excessive indulgence to her children. All day she had been working without ceasing to finish the fancy dress for the evening's party, and her nerves had proved unequal to the task of meeting the frivolous recalcitrance of a child over-excited by the prospect of the dance. Even now, while she plied threat on mandate in a voice of storm, she never ceased sewing at one of the rosettes which were to loop up the chintz overskirt.

"Did you hear me tell you to sit *down?*" she shouted.

"I hate you!" shrieked Gertrude.

"Sit *down!*"

To show her independence, Gertrude walked to the chair furthest away from her, with the air of making a careful selection for her personal pleasure, drew it out very slowly, and sat on the edge, with a foot tucked under her. Then she began to tap the mahogany chair-leg with the foot that was swinging, a trifling exercise which she had learnt in the course of her life was at once soothing to her feelings and peculiarly irritating to her mother.

"*Go out of the room!*" stormed Mrs. Keith.

Gertrude took no notice of the command, but temporarily stopped the tapping. Mrs. Keith went on with her sewing in stringent silence, and presently Gertrude's foot resumed its operations on the chair-leg.

"*Go out of the room!*" This time the words were even more violently peremptory, and were backed by an obvious intention to enforce them.

Gertrude made a stubborn grimace, and sat still.

Driven beyond herself, Mrs. Keith threw down her work and jumped from her chair. She seized her daughter and raised her hand tempestuously, but, by miraculous restraint, administered only two or three very light taps.

"It didn't hurt!" cried Gertrude triumphantly.

"I didn't intend it to hurt," said Mrs. Keith, returning to her seat, and evidently already regretting that she had allowed herself to strike the child at all.

She sat down and resumed her work. Gertrude, considering that whatever crime she might have committed had been discharged, strode about the room ostentatiously humming a tune to show that she didn't care. Her mother went on with her sewing and pointedly took no notice. The parties had now reached a point when a reconciliation could be effected by either suing for it. It was a question merely as to which should be the first to make friendly approaches. This, as always happened in like circumstances, proved to be Mrs. Keith. She had been stung to a hasty act, and had to make peace, not only with her child, but with her conscience. Gertrude, with admirable tactics, during the course of her unconcerned perambulations, brought herself within range of her mother each time she passed her. At last the latter put down her work and held out her arms.

"Well, come and kiss mother and say you're sorry."

After sufficient demur to make it clear that she

was showing consideration, Gertrude accepted the proffered olive-branch. In the recesses of her little heart, she too, perhaps, felt a little ashamed of herself, but she had her dignity to sustain. The question of apologies was tacitly waived. Gertrude wept, and Mrs. Keith wept, and then there was a great deal of kissing.

After a while the child stood up and piously allowed the dress to be looped and the rosette to be sewn upon it. While this operation was in progress, Keith came in.

Gertrude broke away, carrying the needle and thread with her, and rushed up to him.

"Oh, daddy, I'm going to a dance! I'm going to a dance!" she cried, and proceeded to execute a few illustrative steps.

"So that's why you are looking so fine," said Keith." "I thought I heard someone making rather a disturbance just now, but I suppose it must have been another little girl."

He intended this to be in the way of a reprimand, but Gertrude accepted it as a humorous sally, gave him an appreciative and rather confidential smile, and then flew round the table in a whirl of dance.

"Come and let me finish sewing on the rosette," said her mother.

After a few more twirls, Gertrude consented to stay her progress, and stood quivering and prancing like a fresh young filly while the bow was fastened.

At last Mrs. Keith cut the thread. "Now go away—I'm tired of you."

"I'm going to a dance! I'm going to a dance!" chanted Gertrude, as she pirouetted out of the room, leaving the door open behind her.

"Oh, dear, I've had such a time with her!" said her mother, when Keith had closed the door.

"I know you have," he answered. "I heard it going on."

"Why didn't you come in and scold her?"

"My dear, when she is in that mood, she is a little more impertinent to me than she is to you, which is saying a good deal. I should have added fuel to the flames, and there would have been a general conflagration."

"She wouldn't be quiet while I altered her dress; she wouldn't stand still to have it tried on; she wouldn't let me measure her; she wouldn't do anything," Mrs. Keith recounted, rather wearily.

"I wish we could manage to make her more obedient somehow. What about sending her to school?"

"She is too young yet, and I don't like boarding-schools."

"A day-school, then?"

"I'm always so afraid of infection," said Mrs. Keith.

"Then I suppose we must go grinding on with governesses; but it means you having her with you more than you ought; and you won't allow her to be punished, so she gets out of control."

"I've often asked you to punish her," said his wife, "but you never have."

"Yes," said Keith, "I've often asked *you* to."

They looked into the fire for a time, a little pensively.

"You have made her look very nice," said the artist, presently. "Where is she going?"

"It's a fancy-dress children's party the Dorringtons are giving."

"Have you to go too?"

"Oh, yes; I must go and dress in a few minutes."

"The others are not going?"

"No, it is too late for them. Do you really think Gertrude looks nice in that little Pompadour gown?"

"Yes, very."

"She will have her hair powdered, of course. You know, you have never painted her, Howard, though you have so often said you would; and soon she will be getting past her pretty age."

"I will," said Keith, struck by an idea. "I'll paint her to-morrow in this dress."

"Oh, no, I don't want you to do that," said his wife quickly. She was plainly overjoyed, but very genuinely anxious not to take selfish advantage of an offer extorted from his good-nature. "You must rest while you are here. You must be tired."

"I'm not," he answered; "and if I didn't do Gertrude, I should do something. I can't keep still."

"How have you got on this week?"

"Oh, quite well. The picture is going to be all right, I *think*. The name is the worst part of it. I wish I could get another."

He walked round the table, mechanically kicking aside the strewn pieces of chintz and satin, then returned to the fire and put his elbow on the mantelpiece. Mrs. Keith sewed steadily.

"Hermione wants to go with Gertrude to the dancing-class next term," she said, after a while. "Do you think she may?"

Keith did not answer. He was still thinking.

"May she?"

" 'The Return' would be worse," said the artist, "and 'Daylight' is rather meaningless. You see——" He looked up and met his wife's eyes.

"May she?" said Mrs. Keith again, looking at him steadily.

"Of course," he replied; then turned his back to the fire and added very airily: "Why not?"

"You didn't hear what I said"—a little sharply.

"No, I'm awfully sorry," he admitted, with prompt penitence, "I didn't. What was it?"

"I wish you would listen when I speak to you. I said, could Hermione go to the dancing-class?"

"How much is it?"

"Three guineas for a course of thirteen lessons."

"She is rather small."

"She could learn something, I think, and she wants to go so much, poor dear!"

"Supposing I don't sell the picture?"

"Oh, you will, of course. You always think you may not, but you always do. Besides, we are not so poor as we used to be."

Keith laughed. "Well, I suppose it will run to the dancing-lessons," he said.

The next morning Gertrude was again arrayed in the Pompadour dress, and Keith took her to the room at the top of the house, which he used as a makeshift studio, and set to work on her portrait. She was old enough to have the beginnings of vanity, and consented to sit almost still for ten minutes at a time, so long as she was allowed to jump up to see how the picture was getting on whenever she could bear the suspense no longer,

and to fill the intervals between each period in painting what Keith was informed was a portrait of himself. By the evening the work promised so well that he decided to give another day to it. His big picture was sufficiently far advanced to make such a holiday-task a permissible luxury. So Gertrude was forgiven lessons in return for an extension of complacence; and all through Monday he continued to place, bit by bit, upon canvas the little white head and the pretty, serious, grey-eyed face, and the picturesque dress of satin and chintz. Nothing he had previously done had brought him so much genuine encouragement and admiration from his wife. Again and again she came up to see the progress that had been made; and she sat behind him, absorbed in interest, earnestly and enthusiastically watching him paint. The play of the brush, moving quickly and surely by the guidance of his sensitive fingers, seemed magical. His reputation had grown up by degrees during their life together, without apparent change in him personally; and it needed, perhaps, some such appeal to her heart as his present subject made to show her, in an illuminative moment, how high were his powers and how great he had become.

By the end of the day Gertrude was getting decidedly tired of looking pretty, and the painting

had reached a stage when each period of ten minutes' work revealed such little change that she lost interest in it. She thought he put on a great deal of paint to no purpose, and said so. So he smiled and kissed her, and gave her a fee out of his pocket, and told her she could have five whole days' holiday with her lesson-books.

When he reached the studio on Tuesday morning, he found a note waiting for him. He did not know the handwriting, and opened it without interest. These were its contents:

"Dear Mr. Keith,

"Why didn't you tell me plainly on Friday that it would be a bore to you to show me your pictures? It would have been so much kinder.

"Sincerely yours,

"Aimée Hughes."

Chapter VII

At three o'clock on Wednesday afternoon Aimée arrived unheralded at Bruton's studio, and the painter did not need to look twice at her to realize that her temper would call for assuasive treatment.

"I hate the English," were her first words, "and I think, when you are painting a skirt, you ought to cover the top half of the dummy. It looks horrid like that."

"What have we been doing?" asked Bruton, at the same time obediently and quite seriously placing a cloak over the upper part of his lay figure.

"I'm sorry I was born in England," continued Aimée. "I know my heart is French. I can't think what excuse you inflated people have for taking so much room on the earth."

"A good, hardy, fighting race!" said Bruton.

"Oh, it's no use fighting the English; they are not made of flesh and blood: they are made of concrete. Bullets hit them and ricochet. That's why you always muddle through. Nothing can get through your hides."

"Not even a woman's eyes?"

"Not even a woman's lips," said Aimée.

Bruton slowly mixed paint on his palette. "I'm short of data on the subject," he said calmly. "If you like to experiment, I'll give you an opinion afterwards."

"Oh, you are not genuine stock. There's something Gallic in you. If I kissed you, I could make you sell your soul."

"I'm glad you admit I've got one to sell," said the little artist, attacking his canvas. "I gathered the other day that that's more than you claim for yourself."

Aimée jumped up, seized each of his ears from behind, and swung his head violently from side to side.

"Turn off the torture," he cried. "I recant."

She released him and sat down by the fire.

"Now, let us get to the special indictment," said Bruton.

"Oh, for one thing, Chester says I come too much to your studio."

"Why, I thought he and I were particularly good friends."

"Oh yes, he likes you very much, but he says he doesn't want his wife to be talked about. That's English smallness, you see. There is one graven

image you all bow down to, and its name is Gossip. You fear neither God nor the devil, but you are the slaves of your neighbours."

"It's much the same all the world over," said Bruton, carefully putting in a thin streak of mauve with the point of his brush.

"In France," said Aimée, "if you see, much less speak of, other people's personal doings, you may look for a way to the next world, for there's no more room for you in this."

"Very rough on the old women," said the painter. "We do what we like here—this is the land of the free," he added, voicing the shibboleth with a smile, for the pleasure of hearing her reply.

"Free!" scoffed Aimée. "You love in chains and work in chains and think in chains. Free love, free labour and free thought are all anathema. You can't do a hand's turn without the leave of a trade union, or look in a woman's eyes without the licence of the Church. Every woman is a spy and every man a warder."

"Those are little things," said Bruton, still smiling. "Where we score heavily is in having a free press and free speech."

"Bosh!"

"Go to Hyde Park. Hear them getting hoarse. Anybody may speak on any subject under the sun."

"Yes, anybody may speak, but nobody may listen. You are very generous about allowing fanatics to cry in the wilderness: you give them a splendid free wilderness to cry in. But get the ears of the public, interest people in a calmly reasoned attack on any accepted doctrine, and an agent of the Inquisition will touch you on the shoulder."

"There must be a limit," said Bruton. "We give them a run for their money, but we can't let them win. The climate doesn't suit outsiders."

"I suppose that's it," said Aimée. "It's a foggy, muddy place, your England. You live in a slough of begged questions . . . . I don't want to be serious any more. Give me a cigarette and light it for me." She threw herself back in her chair, and looked suddenly like a bewitching baby.

Bruton obeyed her behests, and stood surveying her for a few moments, with rather lazy, reflective admiration, while she smoked.

"Well, what about Colonel Hughes?" he asked.

"Oh, I've promised not to come and see you so much. That's why I'm here to-day. At present, you see, there doesn't happen to be anyone better. And that's another thing. Your friend Mr. Keith is a boor."

Bruton smiled. "He won't humanize?"

"He's quite impossible. You heard him ask me to go and see his pictures on Monday?"

"I heard him agree when you asked yourself."

"Oh, don't be so finicky. You are as bad as Chester: 'I *think,* Kit-ty, you have hardly expressed that with complete ac-cur-acy.' It's all the same thing."

"Anyhow, proceed with the charge." Bruton had ceased painting, and was now sitting on the arm of a neighbouring chair.

"He simply wasn't there. Isn't it inconceivable?"

"Not in the least. He often forgets his appointments."

"But where can he have lived? Where can he have been born?"

"You had better look in *Who's Who.* There are lots of excuses," he added. "He may have been ill."

"He wasn't."

"How do you know?"

"Because I had a note from him this morning."

"What does he say?"

"He is politely apologetic, but not nearly so abject as he ought to be. He says he was painting down at Richmond on Monday, and asks me to go and see his pictures to-day."

"Shall you go?"

"It would be more dignified not to." There was a suggestion of the interrogative in the statement.

"Yes," agreed Bruton, moving back to the easel; "it would be more dignified not to."

There was a look of amusement in his eyes as he began to paint. But Aimée said no more; and through his back he felt her, in the silence, rather pathetically reproachful. His good-nature could not withhold the encouragement for which she was tacitly asking—for which, indeed, he perceived, she had come to his studio.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "this very indifference is distinctly stimulating? You may as well confess."

"Well, it's rather novel," said Aimée, smiling at the fire. "I should have thought he was simply—well—foolish, if you hadn't told me about that picture."

" 'The Sinners'?"

Aimée nodded.

"But, the picture existing, he is a fount of wisdom from which you are disposed to drink?"

"It keeps him alive."

"Well, if it will assist the matter, I can solemnly affirm, without shocking my conscience, that the failure to keep the appointment was not an intentional slight."

"In that case, perhaps I ought to go."

"To show you are not small-minded," said Bruton, squeezing some ochre upon his palette.

Aimée turned her head quickly. "Are you laughing, Brue?"

"Yes, a little," he admitted. "But still, if you want to go, I don't see any reason why you shouldn't."

"He won't misinterpret it?"

"That's just what he *will* do. He'll think you want to see the pictures."

"What shall I say about them?" She suddenly remembered the necessity.

"Don't be interested in them, that's the main thing," said Bruton. "The subjects don't matter—they are of no more account than the canvas—something to work upon—that is, if you are an artist. Talk about the tone values and that kind of thing."

"How stupid!" said Aimée.

"An artist takes dull subjects for preference, to show how superior he is to adventitious aid. If you are interested in a picture—interested in what the people in it are doing—be sure it's a bad one. Look at this," he continued, standing back from his own painting with a poised brush. "You are wondering whether the fellow is going to turn a two or a

ten, and hoping for his sake it may be a ten. That's awful bad."

"Then why do you do it?"

"If it gets hung, there'll be a crowd round it—a crowd of people who know nothing about pictures and are thankful to have found something that doesn't bore them. Keith is doing a dull room in a dull cottage, with two dull, ordinary people in it. It will be hung in a prominent place, and the critics will write columns about it, and use all their best phrases, but the people will pass on to the next."

"But won't the critics praise yours? I'm sure they ought to, Brue. I think it's ripping—really. The clothes are lovely."

"Not they. They'll say, 'Mr. Bruton has a canvas representing card-players in early Victorian dress,' That will come among the sweepings at the end of the third notice. And they'll be right: it's all it's worth. But I shall get my price."

"I'll make Chester buy it, if you don't," said Aimée. She got up and went towards the portière. "Good-bye."

Bruton came up to her, his palette and brush in his hands. "Look here, does Colonel Hughes seriously mind?"

"No; but I told you he says he doesn't want me to be talked about."

"Then you must limit your distracting visits. Don't come *more* than once a week."

"Oh, Brue dear!"

"It's a bitter cup," said Brue. "But brace yourself up; be a man; be worthy of yourself."

"I will when something exciting is happening to keep me alive; but at present I shall have to come when I feel inclined. And always—however exciting anything may be—I must come and talk to you about it. There would be no fun to it, if I couldn't."

"I shall be at home on Wednesdays," said Bruton, lifting the curtain. "You see, in England a husband has a prior claim."

"Bother England!" said Aimée, and ran down the steps.

Chapter VIII

A FEW minutes later she pressed the bell of Keith's studio. Her experience of artists in their castles was that there were never any servants about, and so she was not surprised when the door was opened by the distinguished painter himself, with a palette in his hand and a brush in his mouth.

He transferred the brush to his right hand, now again at liberty after opening the door. "How good of you to forgive my transgressions!" he said. "I scarcely thought I could hope for a reprieve."

"Of course, you don't deserve it," replied Aimée, calmly looking at him. "But I wanted to see the pictures. I have heard so much about them."

Keith gave her a sharp glance; but she passed quietly into the studio without moving a muscle of her face. "So this is *the* painting," she said, standing in front of the big canvas—" 'The Light that Failed.' I'm told it's going to be the only one that is seen this year."

" 'The Light of Day,' " corrected Keith, "not 'The Light that Failed.' It's a miner, you see,

returning from his work. It's evening, of course, but his first sight of the daylight."

"Oh, it's not the subject that strikes me particularly," returned Aimée, carefully following her directions. "It's a good one in your hands, but unless it had been treated very skilfully, it might have become a little sentimental. But the painting is glorious." She studied it in thoughtful silence for nearly a minute. "The tone values are wonderful," she added, still gazing in wrapt contemplation.

This time he accepted it quite simply, and she was too wise to risk spoiling the effect by adventuring further into technicalities. She looked up at him with a pretty, ingenuous air which blended appreciation and envy. "Won't you tell me your secret?"

"I don't think there is any secret," said Keith. "One is born with a certain aptitude for painting, and that is developed by study and travel."

He was deceived by her and felt slightly flattered, but still only the artist in him was touched. He did not think she was a delightful woman to say such pleasant things to him, or feel he had found a sympathetic spirit; he simply thought she had a better knowledge of art than he had supposed.

"One studies the various schools of painting,"

he went on, "and tries to adopt what seems best in each. This, you see"—showing her another canvas—"is in the classical style that was more in vogue thirty years ago than it is now. I've only done it for an experiment—for a diversion, perhaps. The error of the exponents of that school was that they could only see beauty in graceful lines and Venus-like proportions."

"But surely this is very beautiful," said Aimée, much more genuinely impressed than by the larger picture.

"Oh yes, but the beauty is too obvious, and the type too rare. I had four models for that. No single woman in these days reaches such perfection.

She felt a little chagrined. "No single woman?" she queried, lifting her eyes.

He saw the play. "No, nor married one either," he answered deliberately, smiling.

This did not improve matters. For the first time in her life a man was telling her she was not beautiful; a man was looking her in the face and criticizing her appearance. She had a sharp inclination to ask him in what respect he found fault, but she repressed it and passed a little stiffly to the next picture.

"Just an old man's head," she commented. "Was it worth painting?"

A look of quiet amusement came into his face as he stood behind her. He was beginning to discount the value of her earlier praise. "Worth exactly four hundred pounds," he answered. "It is already sold."

Aimée stood back from the painting. Her sense of humour made her smile too. "What a lot I must have to learn!" she said. "It looks nothing more than the most ordinary old man you might meet in the street"—which was the sincerest tribute she had yet paid him. She turned her back on the canvas and looked round the studio. "I expect you think me a little humbug?"

"I think you a little daughter of Eve," he answered.

In the middle of the room a round table was laid with cups and saucers and a few eatables. At her first entrance she had assumed this to be a preparation to provide her with tea. Looking at it more closely now, she noticed that the cloth was coarse, the pottery thick, and the solid fare somewhat disturbing to the thought of a long dinner at eight. This was stridently out of harmony with the furnishing of the room generally, and could not be put to the account of Bohemianism; and then she realized that he had been

using the articles as models from which to paint the cottager's tea-table in his picture. She felt a little disgusted, but, on the whole, relieved: a man's tea was generally a wretched business.

"But I admire your studio awfully," she exclaimed, sweeping off, in a sudden burst of spirits, both her chagrin and her pose. "What a lovely big settee, in front of a lovely big fire!" She threw herself unceremoniously into a corner of it. "Come and sit down too, and tell me lots more about painting, and schools, and styles, and tones, and values. Make me so wise that Brue will be envious. I hate Brue," she added, remembering his final injunction when she left his studio.

Keith was perplexed. He had not expected an extended visit. He had work to do; and this period of the day, which provided the waning light needed in his picture, was particularly valuable to him. Yet here was his guest settled apparently for half an hour, and demanding to be entertained. He hesitated. Then slowly he took the vacant place beside her. He was often involuntarily rude, but he could not deliberately play the boor.

"Yes, it's rather jolly, isn't it?" he said. "I'm afraid I believe in being comfortable."

"Why 'afraid'? I think if we don't get the best from the world during the short time we are

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in it, we are rather foolish, don't you?" She looked at him tranquilly from the big cushion upon which she had rested her head.

Keith smiled. "That's an Omarian remark. Wouldn't it be sounder to say 'give the best *to* the world'?"

"Oh, bother being sound! I believe that is the way you deal with your own life. You devote yourself to painting, and never enjoy anything at all."

"But I enjoy painting. And there is enjoyment in feeling you are contributing something to the world which wasn't there when you were admitted into it, and which you will bequeath to it."

"Oh, what does anything matter when we are dead?" exclaimed Aimée. "We are prehistoric—or shall be before you can light a cigarette. The whole human race will hardly last till I dress for dinner. The earth itself will have fallen to pieces by to-morrow afternoon. What does anything matter?"

"I see you are a little pagan," said Keith.

"Of course I am," said Aimée. "I've got lots of advantages—I'm quite presentable, and quite attractive, and quite capable of enjoying myself—and I'm not going to waste them. People who spend their fraction of the flick of time that the

race exists working like slaves to leave something behind for the remainder of the flick are—well——"

"Simply idiotic," suggested Keith.

"I can't tell you in my presence," said Aimée. "I don't mean that everyone who works is that. Brue, say—he works because he couldn't live unless he did, or have any fun."

She liked the way his calm eyes watched her—with slight amusement and yet with quiet absorption.

"It's bad luck," she answered.

"Well, neither could I."

"Then why not be honest and say so, instead of talking about leaving things behind?"

"Because it wouldn't be true."

Aimée gave a little sigh of resignation and adopted one of her characteristic poses, leaning with her elbows on the arm of the settee, gazing into the fire. This position, which involved a considerable bend to the side, she thought would not be lost on him. He was an artist: he would notice how supple she was; he would see that her figure was not constructed of whalebone and wadding.

"You bore me frightfully, you know," she informed him.

The effective answer was so obvious that Keith

had a sudden inclination to burst out laughing. He was beginning to find his visitor a little entertaining.

"Well, tell me," he said: "supposing I were to accept your philosophy, how would you recommend me to spend my time so as to achieve the acme of bliss?"

Aimée screwed her chin thoughtfully into the hands that were resting on the arm of the settee. "Well, you are having rather a good time now," she answered.

Keith, by this time, was prepared to take her as he found her.

"Oh, *am* I?"

"Well, you said you wanted to study me, and I'm giving you plenty of opportunity."

"The lines at present available for study," said Keith, "suggest a Leighton siesta."

Aimée did not move. "They are very graceful lines."

"I don't deny it; but it's rather difficult to conduct an argument of this weight with the back of a person's head, even though arrayed with the most wonderful black waves and coils."

"You can study those too," said Aimée.

"But I might get so carried away by the sister art that I should want to discard my brushes and wield a comb and a pair of tongs."

"I should love to see you," said Aimée, smiling suddenly at the picture conjured up.

"To sum up the matter, then," said Keith, "you may say that the high old time, which none but imbeciles would neglect, consists mainly of the unremitting study of beautiful objects, such as Leightonesque curves and French coiffures?"

"Besides that," said Aimée, quite complacently, "I meant that we are finding one another out. That's always rather an exciting stage."

This was entirely news to Keith. During the first period of his guest's visit he had been keenly willing her to depart in time to leave him some light; and since that eventuality had definitely passed from the zone of things possible, he had been listening to her with lazy amusement, and finding it just a little difficult to rivet h.s attention. That the present conversation represented any "stage" of intercourse had not occurred to him.

However, he was willing to take her word for it. "I suppose there is something in that," he said.

Then he began to think about it. This clever little French pagan, with her wicked eyes and flexible form and ripping "r's" and kaleidoscopic poses, was finding him out! What was she finding out? Apparently she knew something about

art, enough to carry her through afternoon-tea talk; but she had no real feeling for it. What did she think she was finding out? That he could paint, or that he couldn't? That his great picture was not the masterpiece he thought it? That he was over-rated? That he was personally unedifying? That he was more or less than he appeared? That—his mind fled along the train of speculation and into vivid spaces beyond.

For a time Aimée found the silence satisfying. The daylight had almost entirely faded, and the bright fire, now unchallenged, shed a warmer glow through the studio. It suggested sympathy, growing understanding, wordless communion. But when it had lasted several minutes, she thought that some vocal expression in tune with the conditions could effectively break it.

"Um-m-m!" she complained, her chin still resting on the arm of the settee, "I'm so unhappy." The pathetic note was admirably rendered.

No reply came. She sat up quickly and turned round. Keith was staring serenely into the fire, and a low sibilant sound, that needed only a little more lung-power to become a whistle, was proceeding from his lips.

"Mr. Keith!" she said sharply, "did you hear me speak?"

He came out of his reverie with a slight start.

"No," he admitted frankly—indeed, there was nothing else for it. "I'm so sorry, I'm afraid I didn't. What were you saying?"

She got up and put her hands into her muff. "I was saying that I had taken up far too much of your time."

"Oh, but you are going very hurriedly." He too rose.

"I think I have stayed quite long enough. Good-bye."

She still kept her hands in her muff. She expected him to ask her to remove one of them, but no such thought for a moment occurred to him. He was only vaguely aware that she felt herself aggrieved.

She paused, with the smallest hint of expectation in her manner. There was still an opportunity for him to make an attempt to detain her; but he did not make it.

"Good-bye," he said. "Don't fall down the steps; it's rather dark."

He closed the door behind her, lighted a pipe, and decided that, as there was nothing to keep him at the studio, he would go home to dinner.

Chapter IX

As Aimée drove home, she said to herself several times that she had washed her hands of Howard Keith. He might have been worth while—there were pleasant traits in him—a nice voice and nice eyes, a gentle, humorous, rather paternal way of looking and speaking, and a delightful calm capacity of taking things as they came, however extravagant and unexpected—he might have been worth while, if he had not been obsessed by painting. It seemed to her that a man essentially human had been warped by devotion to a crank. It had possessed him, and made him insensible and rather objectionable. She thought it was a pity in a man of his ability, and that it was the duty of his friends to see that it ceased to grow upon him. But for her part, she decided finally, as she emerged from the furs of her Limousin, Howard Keith had ceased to count.

Later, while her hair was being dressed for dinner, it occurred to her that an ingrained habit could not be cast off at will. Keith's failure of

the afternoon had obviously been unintentional; such omissions had become so habitual with him that he had appeared scarcely to be able to appreciate that he had given her cause for resentment. One could pity a man who was fettered to an idiosyncrasy which compelled him to offer discourtesies to the people he met, but it was perhaps rather absurd to feel angry. A little woman would nurse her irritation, but no doubt a more generous course would be to endeavour to help him; and it might be that she was the instrument designated by Providence to recover him from his infirmity. Certainly it would need a big pull to draw the essential man from the thick layer of acquired characteristics in which it was imbedded, and that could hardly be done by the influences to which he was ordinarily subject.

By the time the maid had concluded her offices, Aimée had made up her mind to undertake the task. Moreover, she had decided that the first step must be to make Keith sufficiently realize her position—to dispel, at least for a time, the light and rather bantering tone he adopted towards her. She would ask him to something; he should see her in her regalia, amid her throng of guests, in her brilliant rooms. He would come to her among the rest, and she would receive him—kindly. Yes,

it should be a small dance; that would be another way of making him come down from the clouds to pay her tribute. Wherever he went, his talents were postulated. One sat in an atmosphere of reverent acknowledgment of them. But hers, though equally exceptional in their way, so far from providing her with a halo, were probably as yet unknown to him. He should learn that she could dance superbly; he should discover that only men who were acknowledged masters in the art were bidden to her dances, and that even they struggled for her programme; he should be allowed once, perhaps twice, to know what it was to flow to the strains of an Austrian waltz with a partner without bones, who moved without steps.

As she glided downstairs in the clinging silks which her soul loved, she was choosing the guests.

And she was considering the programme while she faced Hughes across the length of the oval table, during the stately dinner. This was an ordeal she usually fretted through. Everything was so perfect, the cooking so good, and waiting so noiseless. Course followed course in smooth succession, and if a fork accidentally struck a plate, it was like the crack of a rifle in the marble peace of an Italian garden. Their voices broke into the silence in subdued tones, discussing current

topics from *The Times,* in *The Times'* phraseology. And Chester, at the other end, seemed so primly content with it all. If only, now and then, he would take her to a giddy restaurant—somewhere where one would be in the midst of the women who ran their lives with a hum, and where one could look at their dresses and their men!

"I've been to see Howard Keith's pictures this afternoon," she said, when he came to a pause in some remarks on the Balkan difficulties. The servants had left, after providing her with the means to eat chocolates and look at dishes of fruit.

"Howard Keith?" he repeated thoughtfully. "Let me see?"

"He painted 'The Strolling Players'—don't you remember? It made a great stir a year or two ago."

"Yes, yes, to be sure—a very in-terest-ing pic-ture."

"You mustn't say that. They don't like their work to be called 'interesting.' "

Hughes smiled. "Where have you learnt that, Kit-ty?"

"Brue told me. Isn't it funny? You like Brue, don't you, Chester?" she asked suddenly, leaning a little over her plate.

"Yes, Bruton is a good fel-low."

"He won't let me go to his studio more than once a week," she complained, making a little face, "because you object."

"But, Kitty, surely," exclaimed Hughes, very much concerned, "you didn't allow him to suppose——"

"Well, you said you would rather I didn't go so often. What was I to tell him?"

"Yes, I am the culprit," he admitted at once, with anxious contrition. "It did not occur to me that it would become necessary to mention the subject. I fear he may misunderstand. I think I should go and see him. Dear me, to-morrow I am sitting in a com-mittee. Friday——"

"Oh, you dear old Chester!" interrupted Aimée, drawn by his genuine distress to regret that she had misled him, "it's all right. He understands exactly how it is. I told him it was only because you were afraid of people talking."

"And so he asked you not to come so often?"

"Of course. But it's a horrid bore, Chester."

"He is a good fel-low," said Hughes again.

"I wonder if you will think the same of Howard Keith?" She smiled reminiscently.

"Now why do you wonder?"

"He doesn't always remember to answer when you speak to him. He is rather grave and thoughtful, and very much wrapped up in his work, but all

the time inclined to be just possible. Don't you know the kind of man?"

"Hum-m-m!" murmured Hughes, with his good-natured, acknowledging smile, which committed him to nothing.

"All the same," said Aimée, taking another chocolate, "I suppose we shall have to have him to something. He is the sort of man people like to meet. Brue says there's going to be nothing in the Academy talked about except his big picture."

"Is it so very fine?"

"It's supposed to be, but I thought it was rather dull. It's a woman in a cottage arranging some tea-things, and a man walking in at the door. The woman isn't even pretty. I suppose it's well painted: Brue says so."

"Ah, Bruton is a better man than he is an artist."

"Well, but he knows good work when he sees it. So I suppose we ought to have Mr. Keith."

"Yes, yes, my dear. Have him, do you mean, to dinner?"

"Yes, or to a small dance. I suppose we shall have to give one or two this year."

"Is that necessary?" asked Hughes, with a little disquietude.

"We can't very well get out of it," replied

Aimée. "We have accepted a great many invitations."

Hughes promptly put aside his personal reluctance. "Very well, Kitty," he said kindly, "we will settle a date. I shall be glad to meet Mr. Keith."

A footman came in and placed cigarettes on the table. They were silent until he had gone. Then Hughes slightly turned his chair and drew it a little nearer the fire. He had lighted a cigarette, which he smoked through a holder.

He cleared his throat carefully twice. Then he said: "Kitty, dear, we had a little quar-rel, do you remember, in December?"

Aimée placed her elbows on the table, blew a cloud of smoke, and looked at the glowing point of the cigarette held in her jewelled fingers. "Yes," she answered.

"Well, when are we going to make up that little quar-rel?"

"Oh, Chester, you have just been a dear," Aimée broke out, flicking her ash to her plate; "and now you are going to make me feel mean and horrid."

"No, no," he said quickly. "I don't wish you to feel constrained by anything I have done."

"I want to be a nice wife to you always. I want to—to—to——"

"Yes?" He looked at her almost eagerly.

"I can't say it. You would say it was wicked."

Hughes crossed his legs, and for a time was silent. "But you still don't wish, I fear, what I wish?"

"Oh, Chester, how can I? The season is just coming on. Let me have a little more time to think, to be happy?"

His face clouded pathetically. The fundamental difference in their points of view was tragically obvious—tragically, it seemed, insuperable.

Aimée left her place and went and knelt by his chair. She put out her hands and played with his watch-chain. "Ask me at the end of the season, Chester," she pleaded. "Will you? Ask me then?"

He sighed slightly, and put his hand on her head. "Very well," he answered.

Chapter X

BRUTON had spread a newspaper on the table in his studio, and was scraping his pipe. The operation involved careful and close attention, and it was only when the strain was for a moment relaxed, by a partially successful effort, that he heard a slight rustle of skirts, looked up, and saw Aimée. She had come in quietly and quickly, and her mood proved to be one of careless abandon and general dissatisfaction.

She sat down on the edge of a big chair near the fire, drew in her breath with a sham shiver, and warmed herself.

"Everything is horrid," she announced. "I'm going to buy a badge of white and purple and green, and be a suffragette."

"I'll come and shout with you," said Bruton. "If I can get arrested, I shall be able to talk to the interviewers about my pictures."

"But, really and truly," said Aimée, still holding her hands to the fire, "don't you think we ought to have votes, Brue?"

"Undoubtedly. You can have mine. It would be a

great relief. You could get up and interview the burglar, and I'd do the housekeeping."

"Oh, you miserable, contemptible thing!" cried Aimée, looking round indignantly.

After a staunch struggle, Bruton broke away a satisfactory lump of the hard coating from the bowl of his pipe. "You've found me out," he said. "I don't like the stairs in my pyjamas. But it's no good making laws if you can't tackle the burglar. He hasn't much respect for parchment. It would be no earthly use to go up to him and say, 'I've got a vote, and I've voted you arrested.' "

"Oh, Brue, I should be sorry for you, poor thing, if you had to tackle a burglar!"

"So should I. But it's what I've got to do, worse luck. That's the trouble of being a man, with a vote."

"How horrid you are! You are trying to make everything out to be just simply brute force."

"So it is. Government *is* force. Laws are no use unless you can enforce them. The suffragettes don't trouble themselves about trifles of that kind. They look upon the police service as a standing dish."

"Well, of course. We can't do without the police."

"Yes, but who's going to fit the chest measurement? You can declare war against Europe, but

who's going to man the ships? What women are asking to be allowed to use the services without being able to contribute to them?"

"Oh!" sniffed Aimée, "you are poor things if you can't fight for us."

"We've been doing that for centuries. But it's not enough for you. What you want now is to get hold of the megaphone and shout the orders."

"Yes, and just because you are bigger and stronger, you say, 'No, no: it's my megaphone. You go back to the kitchen and see how the cakes for my tea are getting on.' "

She began prodding the fire. Bruton looked up from his task and laughed appreciatively.

"Oh, I dare say we shall let you have it some day," he said. "We are very fond of you, and we are a genial set of fellows, on the whole. But that sort of thing isn't government: it's philanthropy."

"O-oh!" cried Aimée. "At least you needn't *taunt* us."

"Personally, I am in favour of being philanthropic," proceeded Brue calmly. "It wouldn't make any difference."

"Oh, wouldn't it! Wait until we get votes."

"Looking at the thing quite frankly," he went on, "women can do nothing, whether they have votes or not, except by the courtesy of men."

Aimée looked at him almost angrily. "You are

saying the most brutal things this afternoon, Brue."

"Oh no, I'm not." He had finished scraping his pipe, and came and sat beside her. "I'm only tabling a few simple, elemental facts. The whole agitation seems to me to be very futile and rather pathetic: women rebelling against their weakness, which nothing can alter, and which, if they will only see it, is their greatest charm."

"Oh, I know, Brue."

Suddenly she looked into his eyes.

"Oh, you'll never make a suffragette," said Bruton.

"All the same," asserted Aimée, leaning back in her chair and dropping her head on the cushion, "you make very one-sided laws."

"True, O queen. If a woman gets kissed, they give the man a month; but if a man gets kissed, he is officially regarded as a lucky dog, without any inquiry about the personal appearance of the kisser."

"Well, he *would* be a pig if he made any objection."

"Wouldn't he! It's a fine thing to be a musician or a hero, and be kissed by a mob of females, most of whom are taking the chance of their lives."

"Oh, you beast!"

"Let us get to the business on the agenda," said Bruton.

"Give me a cigarette. What business do you mean?"

"The purport of my present happiness. This isn't a Wednesday."

"I've nothing particular to say," said Aimée, bending to light her cigarette from the match he had struck, "except that I'm bored, and that I got up a dance on purpose for Howard Keith, and he has refused the invitation."

"I haven't had my card," said Bruton.

"Have you had any lessons?"

"Tut, tut!"

"Then you won't get a card. But why won't Howard Keith come?"

"Did you ask his wife too?"

"Has he got a wife?"

"I told you so. She lives at Richmond."

"I had forgotten," said Aimée.

"You must ask her, if you want Keith."

"But I don't know her."

"You must get to know her."

"How worrying everything is!" complained Aimée. "Where do you say she lives?"

"At Richmond—twenty minutes in a car."

"Do you know her?"

"Oh, yes."

"Is she nice?"

"Very."

"Will you come with me?"

"Yes, if you can get the authority of the editor of the *Queen* to take a vice-husband on a first call."

"Are editors of papers the best men in the world?" asked Aimée ingenuously.

"No; barristers in wig and gown. They are quite irreproachable. They have never been guilty of any incorrectness of any kind, and so they are in a position to look upon the smallest deviation from the strictest rule of conduct as a monstrous thing."

"Such as smoking a cigarette in an artist's studio."

"The beauty of their lives is such," proceeded Bruton, "that the duel between a counsel and a witness is arranged with careful regard to a special variation of British fair-play. The witness stands in the open, and the barrister shoots at him from behind a heavy earthwork called 'privilege,' with a hole in it just large enough to let him sight his gun. If the witness fires, his pistol-hand is tied to his side by the judge."

"Sometimes the witness is a woman."

"In that case, there's even less risk of the counsel getting hit. So if his lunch happens to have disagreed with him, and he wants to get in a particularly nasty one, he can call her by her surname alone. That's very telling. Then he can

look through his peep-hole to see the effect."

"Just now you said men weren't really brutal to women."

"I forgot barristers," said Bruton.

"So all your arguments fall to the ground," said Aimée serenely, her cheek nestling in the cushion of her chair. "Tell me some more about Mrs. Keith."

"Well, I don't know her age, and I don't know how she was dressed when I saw her last."

"Then it doesn't matter," said Aimée. "It's all a great deal of trouble," she went on, pressing her cheeks between her hands as she looked into the fire, "and I don't really care a bit about the man. But he treats me in such an off-hand way. He's sometimes almost patronizing. I don't think he knows who I am."

"He knows you are the wife of Colonel Hughes."

"Does he know he is the Member for Brackett?"

"Oh, yes, he knows that."

"And that his is one of the oldest families in England?"

"I dare say."

"And that his income is over five figures?"

"Oh, you won't impress him with money," said Bruton. "He looks upon it as a handmaid to art. That's his only idea of the purpose of money. You

don't realize, my dear Aimée, the solemnity of art."

"Hang art!"

"If they'll do that," said Bruton, "I, for one, shall be satisfied. To a man like Keith, you are the sort of people who have to exist in order to enable painters to go on giving their work to the world. You can draw your money from land, or make it out of ships or carpets or candles—it doesn't matter—it's only a means of enabling art."

"I hate you more than usual to-day, Brue," said Aimée.

"Oh, those are Keith's ideas—not mine. I have a proper reverence for money. I am quite willing to exchange possessions with Colonel Hughes. If he'll give me his income, I'll hand him my brushes, and cry quits."

"So would anyone."

"Oh dear no! Keith wouldn't. He wouldn't sell his art for a million a year."

"When people say they don't want money," said Aimèe, "it's generally affectation."

"It's always the truth," said Bruton. "They may think they want money, but what they really want is the ability to make other people work for them. Money is no use unless a sufficiency of people haven't got it. If we all had ten thousand a year, we should all black our own boots."

Aimée thought a while. "Yes, I suppose that's true," she said. "But we haven't all got it, so why worry about it? Brue"—she bent towards him over the side of her chair—"have you seen Mr. Keith since I went to see his pictures?"

"Yes; I lunched with him two days ago."

"Did he say anything about me?"

"Not a word."

"You get horrider and horrider. I don't know why I've tolerated you so long." She sprang up sharply.

"You forget there's a bet going," said Brue, rising too. "I'm on the other horse."

Suddenly changing her manner, she gave him both her hands, came close, and looked up into his face. "Brue, I *am* rather nice?"

He did not answer, so she pressed him further. "Wouldn't you like to be married to me?"

He stretched her arms out wide, so drawing her nearer to him. "Yes," he replied. Then he brought her hands together again. "But I wouldn't marry you for a kingdom."

This apparently satisfied her. She picked up her muff and flitted to the door. "Well, since you insist, I'll go and call on Mrs. Keith."

"I'm afraid you pamper me," said Bruton, as he watched her go down the stairs.

Chapter XI

THERE is a curious difference between the effect upon us of a bad brush picture and that of a bad pen picture. The former is passed with indifference or amusement, according to our mood and the extent of the delinquency, but the latter fills us with a kind of personal shame; it makes us feel, to put it colloquially, "uncomfortable." The reason is, perhaps, that, in trying to convey an impression of scenery, the painter works, whether well or ill, in a field which is legitimately his; whereas the writer is a trespasser, and only superexcellence of achievement can excuse him. If the word-painter were removed from it, the world might lose a little, but life would be appreciably easier for the individual. The professional variety at his best is just tolerable; at his worst, he is an exasperating bore. As a rule, however, he commits his crimes impersonally and in print. We are not responsible for him, and he can be skipped. With the amateur the case is more serious. The particular culprit may be of our own flesh and blood. Quite homely and decorous

people, who go to Switzerland, go to the Mediterranean, go to the Norwegian fjords, consider themselves called upon to send detailed descriptions of the familiar scenes to their friends. These efforts always err on the side of exuberant rhapsody. The friends read them with a curious chill running down their spines, and pass the letter on with a blush. Instead of surprised admiration at the unexpected powers revealed, the reading of such a letter is commonly followed by a period of silence while it is being returned to its envelope. Then someone says, with an effort, "They seem to be having rather a nice time," and the matter drops.

What human beings want to hear about is human beings. If the decorous folk who take their holidays abroad will leave the scenery alone, and describe the idiosyncrasies of the people they meet in the train, at the hotel, on the steamer, their letters will pass round a wide circle of entertained and appreciative readers.

The view from Richmond Hill, the trees clothed in the heavy rime of a February frost, on the day Aimée went to call on Mrs. Keith, made her for a few moments a semi-conscious word-painter, with designs on her friends. She had a swift, stirring "I'm to describe it to someone—to Bruton, to her watched to Keith himself. Then the half-moulded

purpose passed into wonder that an artist should choose to paint the drab interior of a workman's cottage with such a subject as this lying at his door.

That thought, too, passed; and then, suddenly, the beauty of the scene had a subjective effect. She was moved by a slight but sensible impulse to return. She looked a little way into herself, and vaguely searched for her object in seeking the woman to whose house she was bound. Did she wish to know her? Was it even a social duty demanded of her? Neither question could be answered in the affirmative; but—the mental process ran on swiftly—the purpose of most people who visited the wife of a celebrity would be to know the celebrity, not the wife. Assuredly it was not her object to injure Mrs. Keith. There she was perfectly honest with herself. Whatever pain might at times be indirectly attributable to her thoughtlessness and irresponsibility, and however lightly she might regret the accomplished fact, it was not in her nature deliberately to seek to injure any one. She was making this call—so she further and still honestly informed herself—as part of her general plan to extract enjoyment and satisfaction from the incidents she encountered. She wished nothing better than that all other people, Mrs. Keith included, should conduct their lives on the same principle. Furthermore, she had been misunderstood—she had almost been slighted—

and it was necessary for her to correct a false impression. That was her final thought as she reached the house of the artist's wife and pressed the door-bell.

She was shown into a drawing-room—a large, square room, with lattice-windows, delightfully furnished in plain, unpatterned green and white. A tall vase of anemones stood on the polished centre of a round Chippendale table. No one was in the room, but there were indications that it had recently been tenanted, and only temporarily vacated. A small table near a chair was covered with the equipments of homely needlework: materials for a child's blouse, needles, scissors, and cotton. The chair itself appeared almost to show the impress of the form that had lately occupied it. On a cabinet stood a large framed photograph of Keith. The only familiar object in an unfamiliar environment, it made a pleasant, friendly appeal to Aimée. She felt suddenly that she knew him much more intimately than she really did, just as a mere nodding acquaintance in London develops immediately into a crony if you meet him in the streets of Constantinople. The photograph made real to her, too, the fact that this was veritably the home of the young artist whose name was emerging so steadily and insistently—this room with its odd mixed suggestion of æstheticism and domesticity. Then, as she

looked at it, it revived dimly the inward questionings quelled on the doorstep. She was gazing now, it seemed, not at a vivid, self-centred painter in the isolation of his studio, but at a quiet head of a family, the ordinary English husband and father, the pivot of a home. She turned away just as the door opened.

Mrs. Keith came in, leading a child of seven or eight by one hand.

"Oh, how do you do?" she said, smiling hospitably, and holding out her disengaged hand. "I hope you won't mind my little girl. She has got a cold, poor darling, and couldn't go out with the others; so she is feeling terribly sorry for herself—aren't you?—and declines to be left in the schoolroom. Do, please, sit down."

She hadn't the faintest idea as yet what had brought her visitor, and knew nothing about her beyond the name and address on her card, but her innate kindheartedness went out generously and spontaneously. Strangers and friends alike found Mrs. Keith invariably delightful to get on with. She had the exquisite faculty of making them feel at home. The few people she did not like were never permitted to suspect it in her manner. They went away feeling they had made a good impression, and the subsequent discontinuance of intercourse was so gradually and tactfully effected that it ap-

peared to them, when achieved, to have been the result of a mere process of mutual drift.

Aimée seated herself with well-bred composure, and sat up with her hands in her muff. It was not a hypocritical pose. Many demeanours, each equally characteristic, were lodged in her small composition. She was as much herself now as when she gave rein to freakish, babyish mannerisms in the society of her masculine intimates.

"Are you wondering why I've come?" she asked frankly.

"I expect you have met my husband."

"Hasn't he told you?" Aimée was distinctly surprised and slightly disconcerted at being faced by the unexpected necessity to explain her position. At a later stage of their intercourse it might not be unsatisfactory to discover that Keith withheld things from his canonical partner, but at present the omission could hardly be attributed to anything but indifference.

"Oh, he meets a great many people," replied the artist's wife, lightly brushing off the significance of her husband's neglect.

"I met him at Mr. Bruton's studio. You know him, don't you?"

"Oh, yes!" exclaimed Mrs. Keith, smiling with genuine delight at touching a common note. "Such a nice man! (Don't do that, darling.") The last

remark was addressed to the child, who was pulling at her dress, trying to distract her attention. "He is always so happy and good-tempered, isn't he?"

"And rather cynical," said Aimée.

"Yes; but it's such good-natured cynicism. (Hermie darling, if you don't keep quiet, I shall have to send you away.")

The parenthetic warning to her daughter was uttered in a grave undertone, whereby she hoped, in the face of experience to the contrary, that the child would be induced at least to appear amenable to gentle discipline. But the latter knew perfectly well that there was no one in the house at that particular moment whose business it was to look after her, and that her mother would not be able to bring herself to leave her unguarded. Besides, the threat of being sent out of the room was so common and so rarely carried out, and was such a mild chastisement at the worst, that it had no terrors for her. Accordingly, the grave undertone passed like wind in the willows.

A few minutes were occupied in satisfying the immediate claims of Hermione, and then Aimée was able to explain the purpose of her visit. "I have really come to make you an apology," she said. "I am giving a small dance next month, and I sent your husband a bachelor invitation. It must sound

very absurd to you, but I simply didn't know he was married."

Mrs. Keith laughed cheerfully. "Yes, he looks very like a bachelor, doesn't he?" she said, gently stroking Hermione, who for a few moments had ceased her tantrums, "and he lives like one too. I sometimes think myself that Howard ought never to have got married."

"Do you mean he is wedded to his art?" asked Aimée, smiling.

"He hasn't got the householder's instinct," returned Mrs. Keith. "He knows absolutely nothing about hot-water pipes, and carving a joint, and how to get off serving on juries, and all the things a man with a house is expected to know."

"But he can paint so splendidly!"

"I suppose he can," said his wife, in the same light, happy vein. ("No, darling—no, no.) He is painting one of my children now—not this little monkey; an elder sister—in a little Pompadour costume I made for her for a fancy-dress dance. It's very nice to be able to paint, but it doesn't tell you what to do, does it, when the electric light suddenly goes out?"

Her brightness and humour were infectious. Aimée began to laugh too. She thought she liked her,

"Do come to the dance," she asked spontaneously —"my dance."

"It's very, very good of you," said Mrs. Keith, "but I've given up dancing, and I don't like leaving the children for so long."

"But"—Aimée hesitated—"wouldn't their nurse look after them?"

"Oh, yes; it's all right if I am in the neighbourhood, and can be sent for; but if I were miles away in London, and one of them were to be suddenly taken ill, there would be no one to do anything. Besides, I always think of the house getting on fire, and all sorts of horrible things. Hermione, sit up."

Hermione had left her mother, and was sprawling on the sofa in a very inelegant attitude, without attempting to disguise her ennui. Aimée did not care for her, and privately thought she would have been very much better in the schoolroom.

She contemplated her hostess for a few moments with amazement and commiseration, and yet with some lurking appreciation. "What a splendid wife you would have been for Chester!" she said suddenly.

"Who is Chester?"

"My husband."

"But I'm sure he doesn't want a splendid wife," laughed Mrs. Keith.

"Oh yes, he does. I am much too worldly for him. When he gets back from the House, he would like to find me making children's blouses, and I know he would love to be asked to hold wool so that I could knit little vests."

The reference to the "House" was distinctly dragged in, and it made no impression on Mrs. Keith. She wondered vaguely if her visitor's husband were a Cabinet Minister, whose name she ought to know, and then decided that it did not much matter. She had a great respect for royalties, but none for Cabinet Ministers.

She surveyed the dainty, exquisitely-gowned form of her visitor. "Oh, I don't think he would really want you to make your children's clothes," she said, smiling. "I make some," she added, looking at the materials on the table beside her, "but then, of course"—laughing at herself—"I'm faddy."

"The trouble is," said Aimée, realizing, as everybody did—with a quick feeling of comfort, and with curiously little surprise, though she had certainly not anticipated it—that she could make a confidante of Mrs. Keith, "I haven't got any children. I had one, but she died."

"Oh, poor little thing!" The note of distress was deep and genuine. Tears stood suddenly in her eyes. "What you must have gone through!"

"I felt it very much at the time," said Aimée, reviving her sorrow with a slight effort, on finding herself unexpectedly an object of poignant sympathy, "but it's more than a year ago now."

"And it was the only one?"

"Yes; but—well——" She hesitated, and looked at the child, who had now retreated to the window-seat, and was playing with a box of bricks extracted from beneath it. "You see, I'm modern, Mrs. Keith."

"Does that mean——?"

Aimée nodded.

Mrs. Keith was not shocked, as Aimée had half expected her to be. She conducted her own life on definitely conventional lines, but her outlook was not narrow. "Well, it *is* a disagreeable time," she said frankly, with a sympathetic smile. "I think most of us would like to dispense with it, if there were any other way. But children are such a joy, aren't they?"

"That is what Chester says. Do you think I am a great sinner?"

"Oh, no. I think we women, who have everything to go through, have a right to decide whether we will or we won't. I expect, as time goes on, you will find you can't do without them."

"Oh, what a nice comforting person you are!"

exclaimed Aimée, with real gratitude, warming to her hostess perhaps all the more sincerely because she had come prepared, if anything, to find her uncongenial.

"I always think, in a way," Mrs. Keith went on, "that it is everyone's duty to have two children; then the world doesn't lose."

"I don't mind so much about the world," said Aimée, "as about Chester."

"Oh, bother the men!" said Mrs. Keith candidly. "They really can't claim a voice in it at all. But I think you will find you are both of the same mind before long. Hermie dear, ring the bell, and we will have tea."

"Oh no, thank you so much," exclaimed Aimée, getting up. "I really must not stay."

"Why, you have only just come! And you can't go back to London without tea." She was cheerfully insistent, and Aimée, feeling curiously unlike herself, contentedly sat down again. "Have you seen Howard's pictures? Did you like them?"

When the maid had left, after bringing in the tray, Aimée returned to the purpose of her visit. "Mrs. Keith, won't you come to the dance? Won't you try to manage it, to make an exception? I will promise you some lovely partners."

"If you were quite honest," said her hostess, smil-

ing at her own thoughts as she poured out the tea, "wouldn't you admit that it is Howard you really want, and not me?"

"When I came, it was," Aimée confessed quite frankly. "I'm rather proud of knowing him, and I had been telling people I hoped they would meet him. But now I want you too."

"That's very sweet of you. You have quite made amends for not knowing of my existence. I haven't danced since I was married, and I couldn't feel happy to leave the chicks; but Howard is quite used to going about without a chaperone."

"Will you persuade him?"

"Oh, you can do that much better. I'm sure he couldn't refuse you." There was a slight accent on the final pronoun, conveying a quiet compliment, which Aimée fully appreciated.

"Well, you see," she said, "I sent him a bachelor invitation, and so, of course, he *did* refuse."

"That was a very ordinary misunderstanding. It won't take long to explain."

"So I shall send you a card," said Aimée. "How lovely it must be to have a husband who is talked about! Chester never does anything but walk through the lobbies and make speeches that are not reported. I wish he would get himself made Prime Minister. But even that is rather dull and fogeyish. One would have to entertain all the bores."

"Perhaps that is better than entertaining all the cranks," said Mrs. Keith.

"Is that what you have to do?"

She nodded spiritedly.

"But I'm going to rebel before long," she said, "and then he will have to find another wife."

Chapter XII

AIMÉE'S visit to Richmond bore fruit to the extent that, a few days later, she received a reply from Mrs. Keith to her invitation, accepting for her husband, though still declining for herself. She had quite sincerely, and almost eagerly, wished the latter to come while she was sitting and talking with her, but now that she was away from the magnetism of her presence she was fully satisfied by the accomplishment of her original purpose. Aimée, it must be confessed, was a witness to the occasional truth of the callous adage, "Out of sight, out of mind." The interests and pleasures and people of the world passed before her in unceasing procession, and it was always that part of the long train directly in front which riveted her attention. There were incidents in her life to warrant the supposition that, had Howard Keith been immediately attracted by her, had he shown a disposition to give her his friendship, she might by this time have extracted from him everything of interest to her, and have watched him pass on, and that her eyes might al-

ready have been searching for the next figures in the cavalcade. It was his obstinate refusal to be the least affected by her, his careless neglect of the personal attributes which had so often and so easily proved their potency, which accounted for his steady and steadily expanding presence in her field of vision.

For there was no doubt that at present he occupied her thoughts in a degree disproportionate to the genuine interest he had awakened. As she sat with Mrs. Keith's note of acceptance in her hand, she wondered suddenly why she should feel so elated. She had seen him three times, and spoken to him twice. Nothing had taken place on any of these occasions at all adequate to explain her present feeling. Nor could it fairly be placed to the score of his distinction. He was a rising painter, beginning to be known—most people had heard of him—but he had still a long way to go. Of course, she felt a little attracted by him, but only quite a little, not nearly so much as she had sometimes felt by men whom she was far less anxious to impress. She liked his quietly appreciative, rather dignified style—the suggestion of shimmering sun on a deep sea—it fitted with the idea of a man to some extent apart. As yet, too, there was the fascination of mystery about him. She felt there were traits in him

—fuller and more positive than were to be found in most men—which he had not allowed her to see, which, indeed—to be truthful—he had made her feel she was not sufficiently important to call forth. He had given her a manner, not a personality. She wanted to get the personality. But most of all she wanted to show him herself in her own environment, and to let him feel her waltz.

On the night of the dance she was careful to look her best. She wore a superb gown of black and gold, fitting like a sheath, and combining puritanic simplicity of design with Oriental splendour of adornment.

Joining her in the drawing-room before the arrival of the first guests, Hughes himself complimented her.

"My dear Kit-ty, how very charming!"

"Are you proud of me, Chester—just a little?"

She looked persuasively up at him, standing close.

"Ah, I think it is unnecessary to reply to that question."

"I must press the right honourable gentleman," smiling gaily.

"The answer is in the affirmative," conceded Hughes, also smiling. "There is no gathering you would not grace, my dear. I hope you will en-joy yourself."

The guests began to come in, and soon they were both occupied. Half consciously at first, but afterwards with appreciated purpose, Aimée watched for the figure of Keith among the stream of incomers. Several times, amid jewelled heads or through a brilliant maze of coloured draperies, she thought she saw him approaching. But the minutes passed, and he did not come. Her programme quickly filled. One dance—a favourite waltz—she kept. Why was he so late? By the time the opening bars of the first waltz swept off the strings of the violins he had still failed to appear, and she was feeling very cross. How could he expect to get the best partners if he came after the dances had started? If he had arrived in time, she could have steered him smoothly to the quarters most likely to assist his evening's well-being; but now it would be an interjected and perfunctory business. It might not be possible to squeeze him into the most desirable programmes, he would have a dull evening, and his mind afterwards would inevitably connect it with her. Already the first couples were gliding over the polished floor. She took her partner's arm, and in a moment had forgotten everything and everybody, Keith included, in the dreamy ecstasy of the rhythmic motion.

The beat, beat, beat of the time, the light shuf-

fling sound of continuously moving feet, the curious sense in the air of a mass of people breathing quickly, as the waltz wore to its end. The familiar joy was flooding through Aimée's veins when she caught sight of Keith over the shoulder of her partner. He was standing near the door, tall and quiet, innately distinguished, talking to no one. Her annoyance considerably subsided when she saw him. Whatever remissness he had been guilty of had so obviously been unintentional. He was equably watching the proceedings, apparently searching for her among the dancers, with an air of almost child-like pensiveness—an air, nevertheless, which had the paradoxical effect of making the people about him appear to be petty people, engaged in petty things.

When the dance finished, he made his way to her slowly through the throng of guests. She was seated beside her partner, who was fanning her. These circumstances, she realized, were less dignified, less impressive, than those in which she had pictured him finding her, in which he would have found her half an hour earlier, when she was standing receiving her guests. For every reason his late arrival was a pity. As he approached her, she put aside the fan, and the arm with it, rather shortly.

To her sharp disappointment, he greeted her with

the same gentle, slightly chaffing manner he had adopted in his studio, lightly deprecated her somewhat coldly uttered remark that it was good of him to come, paused and looked round, as if expecting her to offer introductions, and then evidently remembered that it was his business to ask her to dance.

He sat down beside her, obviously completely unconscious of the man on the other side, whose immediate prerogative he was usurping. "What a delightful room!" he said. "The pink harmonies are wonderfully effective. I hope you will give me a dance?"

He made the request without the least indication in his voice that he appreciated he was asking a high favour. In fact, he did not appreciate it. Functions such as this made no personal appeal to him. He came from a sense of duty, or, at least, of expediency. While art depended mainly for existence on the monied classes, artists were driven to the commercial shift of taking opportunities to meet and interest them.

"I've only one," replied Aimée—"number sixteen. You've come rather late, haven't you?"

It was very hard for her not to tell him that she could have filled that one a dozen times, but

it would have involved telling him also that she had been keeping it for him.

"Yes; I'm so sorry," he answered, quite contritely, looking at her with smiling eyes, which, half in earnest and half in play, entreated forgiveness. "Just as I was starting I remembered my correspondence. Night is the only time I can afford to give to it, and to-day there were two or three short letters which couldn't be shirked."

"You strange man!" Aimée turned her thrilling eyes upon him with deep wonderment. "You could think of writing letters when you were going to a dance!"

Her late partner, who by this time had obtained an excellent view of her graceful back, rose quietly and walked away, evidently feeling a trifle hipped. There had been a time when she had devoted as much attention to him as she was giving Keith; but he was an old story; she had reached the last page of him, and now was not averse to return the volume to the library.

"Dancing is an emotional business," said Keith. "A good dancer riots in pagan joy. The staid old ladies who get up charity balls are simple bodies." There was still a smile in his eyes.

"Are you a puritan, then?" He mystified her,

as he always did. She wanted to read him and couldn't.

He smiled outright. "Did you ever hear anyone confess to that?"

"Well, then, come and be a pagan," she said, getting up. "I'll find you some partners."

The partners, however, appeared to interest him less than the partner's parents. She left him in the midst of a group who had pounced upon him with alacrity, and were conscientiously taking the points of a possible young lion. One or two of them were genuine art connoisseurs, and to these, so far as Aimée could see, he chiefly devoted himself during the evening. Two or three times she noticed him dancing, but for the most part he sat talking, with apparent absorption, to some fellow-spirit whose waltzing days were over.

He accepted all he saw quite calmly. Bruton was right—the setting in which he found her had produced no effect upon him. He treated her with the same easy, light manner as when they had first met, and walked through her brilliant rooms with an air of indifference, appearing to find them such as he had expected to compose the home of the woman he had chaffed in the studios. She was chagrined, and yet, in a sense, she felt relieved. It freed her. When their waltz came, she would no longer play the hos-

tess; she would be the woman. She would dance the indifference out of him. He had called it pagan pleasure. Well, she would make him an unholy pagan.

The early stiffness by now had worn off. The redolent air and the champagne and the music had done their work. People were on good terms with themselves and with one another. The dances went with a swing. The dancers could have sung as they danced.

After the silence of an interval, the strains of a Hungarian waltz wailed across the ballroom. This was Keith's dance. He was not in the room when her previous partner left her. Then she saw him appear at the door and pick his way round the maze of moving couples. She rose calmly. He put his arm round her waist. Did he feel the flexible form of her, where in other women his hand had rested on whalebone? Did he notice already how she yielded to the time, how she was not a thing of joints and bones, but a sylph, light as air and soft as velvet, throbbing with warmth and joy, who floated on the wings of the music?

To be truthful, he entirely failed to notice it. He was not a good dancer, and he was too occupied with the management of his own step and the fair conduct of the matter before him to notice any-

thing else. If he could come through this without distinctly colliding with anyone, and without touching her feet, he would be satisfied. He steered her amongst the couples with exact care, paced her slowly backwards whenever the indulgence appeared to be excusable, gave her no opportunities to reverse, to dance against the time, or otherwise to perform terpsichorean tricks, and finally, having brought her to a point near the door, asking solicitously if she would care to rest.

She agreed dumbly. Her disappointment and annoyance almost choked her. She guided him in silence to a seat in one of the corridors sheltered by palms and flowers.

"Why don't you learn to dance?" she asked point-blank, as she sat down.

He laughed. "I learnt long ago." Then he looked at her with naïve amusement. "I'm afraid I haven't made a very good impression."

"You've made a very bad one."

"But we didn't knock into anyone? Nobody called us names?" He was quietly enjoying her unexpected fit of pique.

"Is that what you are used to?"

"Well, you see," he said, retreating to his original cover, "it's a pagan business."

"Then why did you come?"

"Shall I answer that honestly?"

"Of course." She laid her cheek on the back of the settee.

"You were kind enough to ask me twice, and I thought I should meet some interesting people."

"That's not the right answer."

"What is, I wonder?" He was still talking with smiling amity.

For a few moments she fingered the ornamentation on her dress without speaking. Her lids were lowered, and he could see the beautiful modelling of her face as simply as if it had been fashioned in wax. Then suddenly she raised her eyes and looked at him, her cheek still resting on the soft plush. "Mr. Keith, did you ever make love in your life?"

The change in her mood was so startling that Keith took a second or two to realize it. A moment before she had been nursing a preposterous little feminine vapour; now, without any warning, she was indubitably and softly inviting him to make love to her. In her husband's house, almost under her husband's nose, she was inviting him to make love to her.

He was surprised by the suddenness of it, but he was not scandalized. Rather, her new manner touched the same chord of slightly amused interest that her childish spleen at his indifferent dancing

had done. For all his immersion in art, he had not passed through the world with his eyes closed, and Aimée was a type he knew. Often before had he seen lovely, fickle eyes looking at him from much such a setting as the old gold of the settee; often had he seen the beguiling, earnest air, the seductive, sinuous pose. Those alluring attributes signified to him a superficial and very unstable personality, to be treated lightly. He was quite aware what she was doing: he knew that she wanted his scalp; he felt the pull of the feminine charm she was putting forth to draw him to close quarters, and, feeling it, could enjoy watching her methods and laugh to himself at their futility.

"Well, I have contrived to marry a wife," he said.

"How long ago was that?"

"The question is rather disconcerting."

"I mean, haven't you forgotten a good deal since then?"

"In the circumstances, is that a particularly foolish thing to do? But you haven't told me the right answer to the question."

"The person asked should have said to the person who asked him that he knew he would meet her, and that that was the reason he came. Because"—

she moved a fraction of an inch nearer and spoke lower—"even if it hadn't been true, she would have liked to hear it, and would have thought what a nice man he was."

"And would it have covered up the unfortunate trouble about the dancing?"

"Well, perhaps." She smiled graciously, then sank back into a corner of the settee, and made a little sighing sound, half of content and half of complaint.

"And having failed to make that correct answer," proceeded Keith, "he is not entitled to flatter himself either that he is considered a nice man or that the shortcoming of his insufficiently fantastic toe are forgiven?"

"When he puts it like that," said Aimée, "he is getting on."

Lying lazily back, she looked at him through eyes upon which the lids had partly fallen. He knew it to be a pose, and did not think that she managed it particularly well.

"But you miss so much by not dancing," she went on seductively. "When I go to heaven, I hope it will be a place where one dances for ever, on heavenly floors, to heavenly time, with a partner whose step fits yours with heavenly smoothness, and where no one ever gets hot or tired.

Can't you imagine the joy of dancing with a partner who seems to be part of you?"

Keith had been thinking of a face with half-closed eyes he had once painted. He had only caught the last words, and realized that he was in a corner.

"Which part of you?" he returned, hoping for the best.

"Which—— Oh!" Suddenly she sat up stiffly. "*Again* you haven't heard! *Again* you haven't listened!"

"I'm miserably ashamed," he professed contritely. "Won't you say it again?"

"No, I won't." She got up. Her self-esteem was bitterly stung. "I'm going back. My next partner will be waiting for me. I *know* he can dance, and I *think* he can listen."

Twenty minutes later, having informed the solicitous butler that he did not wish his carriage to be called, Keith walked out of the front door, saying to himself that his tendency to be absent-minded was a bad habit, and that he must try to get out of it.

Chapter XIII

VERY late that night, when the last of her guests had gone, and her maid had left her, Aimée threw herself upon her bed, and cried, and cried. She often boasted that no one ever saw her tears. She would not have given way before her fellow-man—and far less before her fellow-woman—but alone, within the guardianship of four walls, and with the door locked, she yielded to the impulse to cry and to cry.

There had come rushing over her the feeling that her life was empty. Her emotions were starved: she had so much to give, and there was no one to whom she could give it. Chester's cherishing indulgence, his generous and gentle affection, especially since the breach, were utterly unsatisfying. Her being called out for the fire and force, the beating passion, the exacting jealousy, the unrelenting discipline, even the cruelty, of a ruler. In her heart she knew that a woman *likes* to be conquered, *wants* to be subject. If she loved with all her essence, her wrathful lord could fling her, reel-

ing, from him, and she would return to kiss his lips. Why had not Chester forced her to give him children? Why had he left her to cry her heart out because there was no one to *make* her love him?

And the stream of men who came and went? The delightful adorers who flattered and spoiled her? What did they count for in the long reckoning? How great a strain would the cord of their allegiance bear? They wanted the utmost of the moment—the utmost that fortune should chance to grant. It might be a dance, it might be a kiss, it might be—the whole of her. But were they prepared to take her to the ends of the earth for evermore? Were they prepared to lay their lives at her feet, to dare and do everything for her? Not one of them, not even Brue—and she thought he loved her a little. She had scores of slaves, and not one master. Not one.

Then, following the tendency of times of depression, the scope of her thoughts widened. She entered gradually upon that vast philosophic sea on which the craft of man has never sailed farther than a child's playboat upon the Atlantic; she began to search into the mystery of existence, to ask whence she came and whither she was going, to speculate upon the purposes of her being and of the teeming world about her.

Wherever she sought, in the animal or vegetable kingdoms, she could see only one definite, consistent purpose of life: to renew life. Continuance was the one note that rang unchanged through all times and through all nature. The end to which the rose, through every stage of its glory, was working was to form seed that other roses might spring from it. Its beauty was incidental; its scent and its honey were lures to attract pollen-bearing bees. The pleasure it gave was the chance and illusory figment of an aesthetic temperament. It was the same everywhere. In the achievement of reproduction life reached its zenith, and thereafter faded. Politics and economics, the distribution of wealth and the rest of it, that people made such stir about, were mere modern matters, the passing things of an age. Even religions varied from epoch to epoch and from clime to clime. All the great accomplishments of man, all his sorrows and joys and aspirations, were but fortuitous by-shoots, springing haphazard from the steadfast purpose of his nature.

Coming back, with this fruit of her mental excursion, to further contemplation of her own individual case, she wondered if her present unhappiness could be attributed to the fact that she was deliberately avoiding the object of her existence, if this could be the cause of the unsatisfied feeling, of

the futility and emptiness of which she was so poignantly conscious? She thought of those plants that are formed male and female, and remembered how they languished if they were planted apart.

After a while she rose from the bed and looked in the glass. Then she sponged her eyes and put a little powder round them. Her nightdress was of the daintiest, almost transparent tissue, trimmed with lace and ribbons. Over this she drew an exquisite peignoir of pale pink, matching the ribbons. She tossed her flowing black hair partly over her shoulders, so that it framed her face. Then she smiled softly at the glass, and it seemed to her that the man who could resist her would not be human.

She lighted a candle and fled quietly out of the room, her thin drapery lightly sweeping the heavy carpet of the corridor. When she came to Hughes's door she paused a moment, and then opened it noiselessly. He was sleeping calmly. She had expected to find him awake. Looking at his unconscious form, listening to his even breathing, her resolution faltered. She stood watching him for several seconds. They were very vital seconds in her life.

She could not yield meekly. She could not completely and ignominiously capitulate. She must

stand out in form for her terms. How would he answer her?

Would he bind her in his arms? Would he use the compelling argument of kisses? Would he hold her till she was weak and helpless? Would he *force* her accept his own terms and no other?

Looking at him sleeping, she could not think that he would. Oh, she knew—she knew he would not. He would expostulate gently; he would appeal. Finding her obdurate, finding he could not overcome her pride—for now, at this moment, it was pride, and that alone, that stood between them—he would steel himself, without difficulty, against her beauty and call her wicked. Perhaps afterwards he would think that that was a harsh saying, and relent a little; perhaps he would kiss her benignly, then send her back to her room. How she hated this English temperament! Lovely and lovable, come of her own accord, was there a man in all France could have let her go?

She had not closed the door, and she did not close it until she was again outside in the corridor. Then, with a swift flutter, like the sudden sweep of a homing sea-bird, she rushed to her room. Once more she threw herself upon the bed, crumpling the delicate peignoir. A few hours later, when she brought her tea, her maid found

her still lying so, tear-stained, asleep, and shivering with cold.

The mood of pessimism did not continue after that night. Her feathers had drooped in the rain of a stinging disappointment, but they quickly recovered, bristling with renewed and more vigorous zest of battle. Twice she had been humiliated —unintentionally, no doubt, but none the less humiliated. To pierce Keith's armour, to make him feel, perhaps to make him suffer, had now ceased to be an amusement: it had become a duty to herself, an affair of personal prestige. Hitherto she had attacked indiscriminately, but after the night of the dance she began to count the competence of her forces, and to accord her dispositions with the object to be attained. The graces and accomplishments which had proved so effective with other men were here, at best, flimsy, ornamental auxiliaries. He saw through the artistry of her pretty poses and adorable ways, he was too clever to be flattered by the light glitter of her chatter, and her beauty he only looked at from the point of view of the artist. On the day that he duly made his etiquette call upon her, coming at the unheard-of hour of six o'clock, because "the light lasts longer these days," and therefore finding her alone, the conversation drifted to models.

He said that he found it difficult to get a satisfactory model for arms, and added that very few women were correctly proportioned in this respect. Aimée instinctively looked at her own.

"Oh, your arms are not paintable," he said, following, in an impersonal tone, his previous argument.

"Why not?"

"They are not really good arms."

Aimée had determined not to feel indignant at inoffensively uttered remarks of this kind, and by his general refusal to offer her the homage of flattery to which she was accustomed. Instead, she explored them dispassionately. She knew she had nice arms—quite nice enough to be found highly satisfying by people whose æsthetic sensibility was not abnormally acute—but that they were not quite perfect. Evidently his eyes had not been closed at the dance, when she wore evening dress; and if he had taken such minute stock of her arms, he must have been equally observant of other points undeniably beautiful. But she did not try to make him say so. Her methods had become more circumspect. No doubt he would have admitted her beauties as simply as he had stated her defects, but he would have thought less of her for seeking the sop to her vanity. All

through this interview she made no attempt to fascinate him: she had proved the futility of that. She watched him, and thought. She talked quietly, took note of his characteristics, his propensities, and his points of view, and afterwards passed in review the products of her observation. She began to see that, from a man such as Keith, to get she must give. The meretricious coin for which she had obtained value from others would not pass with him: she must tender something real.

What had she real to tender—what that would ring the appeal of its truth to his consciousness and call a responsive note? She met him twice during the next few weeks—once at Bruton's studio and once in the street—but the question remained unanswered. And it was still unanswered when, in April, she went for a week to Paris to visit her relatives.

While there her spirits always lifted a degree or two higher than the maximum point they could reach in England. She walked everywhere because she was too light-hearted to drive. The mere sight of the crowded little tables outside the cafés in the boulevards, of the people with time on their hands (which no people in London ever have) drinking cool green liquid out of long glasses, made her want to sing. The absence of

the busybody, the pervading spirit of tolerance, the universal disposition to allow individuals to pick their own way to their own ends, so long as they did not disturb their neighbours, filled her with a glowing sense of freedom. She was outside her prison.

The puritan and the pagan both can find scope for the pursuit of their respective tastes in Paris, but neither is permitted to interfere with the liberty of the other. In Paris grown men and women are appointed arbiters of their own personal conduct; in London they are judged by the public conscience. Nobody takes any notice: that is the spirit of Paris.

Among other peregrinations, Aimée walked one day across the Point Neuf to the Luxembourg, to see Keith's picture, "The Sinners." She stood in front of it for a while, went away, and presently came back, and again stood a long time looking at it. She was elated; her heart was beating: she knew that it answered her question. The man who had painted that picture was not the man she knew, not the man she had yet discovered. No one could have put it on canvas who did not feel it. Passion burned in it and breathed from it. With Keith, the detached, the restrained, the absorbed in ideals of art, she had been helpless; with

the painter of this picture she could strike with weapons lying bright in her armoury, which she could use with effect. Hitherto, in her intercourse with him, she had, rather, been careful to screen the essentially feminine side of her. Now the hood should be lifted from her eyes.

She looked at the picture so long, drinking in its glowing meaning, that her own blood began to glow, her pulses to throb. At last she went away and danced back across the bridges, casting, as she did so, a smiling glance at the presiding spirit watching meditatively over Paris from the top of the cathedral. For the first time in her life she was impatient to leave the French capital and get back to London.

When she returned, however, she did not immediately force an opportunity to meet Keith. Her newly-learned discrimination told her it would be better to wait for chance to bring it in her way. This did not happen until one day in the middle of May, when she was in the galleries of Burlington House. The Academy Exhibition had been open nearly a fortnight, but this was her first visit. Her companion was Bertie Legard, who was honouring the Metropolis by a short sojourn within its gates. His clothes were an excellent advertisement for his tailor, and Aimée felt he

was entirely a presentable man with whom to be seen. He did not go through the formality of pretending to enjoy the pictures, but he stood for a time in front of Bruton's "Cutting for Partners," which had cost its parent a small bachelor dinner at Romano's by finding an immediate purchaser and a fairly prominent place in Room Seven.

He put his hands on his hip-bones. "A very fine picture," he stated, emphasizing the importance of the judgment by giving exceptional firmness to the subsequent compression of his lips.

"He doesn't think very much of it himself," said Aimée.

"The man can paint, all the same."

"He says he would rather be a jockey."

"Well, of course, so would anybody." Bertie smiled amiably.

"Don't let anyone hear you talking," said Aimée, glancing round.

"But jockeys make a thundering good thing," he explained, enlightening her ignorance with a tone and look commensurate with the weight of the information.

"Do they really, Bertie? Are you sure you are not mistaken?" She looked straight into his face without the quiver of an eyelid.

"Oh lord, no!" In a voice of sharp austerity,

and with his chin in the air, he quashed the question.

"I often wish I knew as much about things as you do," said Aimée, moving round a woman with a large hat to see the next picture.

Bertie followed. "Oh, you're rotting! I'm really a most awful ass," he stated, perfectly candidly.

"Oh, you're *not*," expostulated Aimée.

"I am really. I never did any good at Cambridge, and didn't come within a mile of getting called to the Bar. Nell has to write all my letters. She has really."

"Yes, but you know such a lot about dogs and toboggans, and you're splendid at swallowing cigarettes. Besides, you can drive a motor-car."

They walked on slowly into the next gallery, passing the remainder of the pictures in Number Seven without heed.

"Who is the woman on a horse?" asked Aimée, as her eye caught a big canvas.

Berties referred to his catalogue.

It was at that moment that she descried Keith. He was coming in at the opposite entrance.

She stopped. For a moment her breath tightened. Then she turned to her companion. "Bertie, you see the tall man just coming in? Don't

look. If I begin talking to him, slip away, there's a dear."

"Right you are," said Bertie, with the ready generosity that was so much part of his nature that it passed unnoticed both by himself and by everyone else.

"You don't mind, do you?

"Oh lord, no!"

But he did.

Chapter XIV

KEITH, for his part, did not notice that Aimée had a companion, and it never occurred to him to be surprised that she should be alone. At first, indeed, he did not see her at all. He was looking at the pictures.

Aimée saw that it was quite possible he might pass through the room without becoming aware of her, and she did not mean to speak first; so, having carefully noted the direction in which he moved in his course round the gallery, she quietly took a place close to him in the line of his advance, and became absorbed in the pictures. In a few moments he took a step sideways without turning his head, duly bumped into her, and duly apologized; and then, as she looked up at him, he duly recognised her.

"Oh, it's Mrs. Hughes!" he said, quite thankfully. "That's a wonderful relief."

"Why?" asked Aimée, regarding him calmly.

"Because I know she will forgive me," he answered, without shrinking from the gaze, and

smilingly mindful of previous experiences. "She always does."

"She never has done before," said Aimée. "She has hated you. But she will to-day, if you will explain the pictures."

Already he noticed a difference in the way she looked at him. She had always met his eyes quite frankly and steadily, but to-day hers held something at once more genuine and more intimate than they had contained before. He was dimly conscious, too, of a resultant change in himself. He had never as yet addressed a remark to her that was quite serious all through, but now he felt suddenly that it would be possible to talk to her intellectually, and to be interested in what she said.

"Then my exoneration is easily won," he said. "Shall we begin here?"

By this time Bertie had merged into the crowd.

"What's the matter with the young man on the steps?" asked Aimée. "He looks as if he expected to be translated in the next few minutes."

She was looking at a picture of a young man, with a beatific expression, coming down a broad flight of stone steps. The subordinate figures in the background indicated that the building he was leaving was a court-house.

"Don't you scent a topic in it," said Keith—"what the Americans call 'the unwritten law'—the apotheosis of hate?"

"He has killed a man, and been acquitted?"

"Apparently. It's a bad picture," he added.

"Because it tells a story?"

"Well, because it tells it badly. The appeal is cheap and unreal. If it had to be done at all, the man should have looked ill and strained, after his days of exacting trial."

They passed on. Aimée wondered if she should tell him she had been to Paris. She thought she would, but not just then. They paused before several other pictures. Each one Keith criticised. To one or two later (they were walking through the galleries in the reverse order) he paid a warm tribute. At last they came to his own large canvas, hanging conspicuously in Room Four.

"There it is," said Aimée.

"Yes." He affected to examine it critically. "The tone values are wonderfully fine," he said solemnly.

"Well, I know I didn't know very much about it really," admitted Aimée, with a smile, which contained, however, a distinct ingredient of pretty self-consciousness.

"R-r-really?"

"No, I won't say it again."

"Just once more."

"R-r-really," she conceded, with a protest in her eyes. "But I didn't say anything that wasn't true, so I don't think you need be so nasty."

"How do you know you said nothing that wasn't true?"

"Because Brue told me the words, and I repeated them like a parrot." She was braving it out with open enjoyment now.

Whether it were due to the humour in the idea or to her way of putting it, his half-trifling, half-attentive air developed to an expression of vivid, boyish enjoyment, and for the first time in their intercourse he looked down at her with a smile full of human appreciation. "What a humbug you are!" he said.

She sat down on one of the ottomans. She was thrilled, partly because he had at last shown that he could be touched by her feminine qualities, and partly because she had seen through the gates of his eyes into a strangely alive and lovable personality.

He dropped into the seat beside her with a happy alertness that was quite new in her experience of him. And now for a few moments—rather paradoxically—she felt she must keep him

back rather than draw him on. She had gained a point, the first big step, and she wanted a breathing-space.

"What becomes of all these pictures?" she asked, stretching back and looking up at the wall in front, a hand pressed upon the upholstery on either side of her—"all these rooms of pictures?"

"That is a mystery that I can't resolve," said Keith. He was sitting with his knees crossed, partly turned towards her. "Honestly, I don't know how there comes to be a market at all for modern oil-paintings, except portraits."

"Why shouldn't there be?" She was still beating time, looking up at the pictures.

Well, imagine yourself to be capitalist and also a connoisseur. Would you come to Burlington House to buy your paintings, or would you go to Christie's?"

"Perhaps there are capitalists who are not connoisseurs?"

"Perhaps there are." He laughed. "I don't suppose you will often say anything much sager and much nastier all in a breath."

Her breathing-space was over. Not only that, she had decided upon a definite course of immediate

action. She turned to him with a swift suggestion of spontaneous appeal.

"I want you to take me to see some great pictures, some unquestioned masterpieces," she said. "I admit my knowledge of art is only in its infancy, and I want to expand it. You can't pretend you are busy to-day."

She was not quite genuine now, and he saw through her. The attraction she had exerted weakened, but he still felt cheerfully disposed to her.

"Where would you like to go?" he asked.

"Say to the National Gallery. I never can appreciate the paintings there; but with you for a guide I should see them with different eyes."

She spoke in a casual tone, and he was quite unconscious that she waited for his reply with a mind almost tensely strung. He did not take her seriously; but it was true that, at this time of year, while his mind, unfettered to canvases on his easels, was roaming joyously for subjects, he had some leisure on his hands, and he was in spirits to humour her.

He got up. "Come along, then," he said.

She jumped up, too, and walked off quickly by his side, giving him, as she did so, another glance —of acknowledgment or of understanding—which went curiously through him, because he again

felt that it expressed a genuine sentiment. He was dimly aware that she was beginning to inspire him with some respect, with some sympathetic sentiment. There was more in her than appeared on the surface. She was vivid and a little complex. He had his first suspicion that character lay beneath the poses.

When they reached the grey building in Trafalgar Square, he took her round the galleries, expounding the peculiar excellencies and the peculiar failings of the various schools of painting. He showed her what each had borrowed from the others, and where an idea traceable to none had sprung from the brain of some inspired master —a pure gain to the world. Her answers were animated, and often to the point, but there was a lack of an indefinable quality in them which told him that her interest was largely assumed. He was wondering vaguely all the time why she had brought him to the gallery.

After they had worked through half a dozen rooms, she proposed a respite.

"I think you have earned a rest," she said, sitting down—"just five minutes."

He took the chair next her. For a time his eye roved carelessly over the canvases on the wall opposite. Suddenly it was arrested and held by

a particular painting. A little to the left of the direct line of vision from their seats, but quite near enough to be easily observed, hung the Italian picture to which his own in the Luxembourg was said to be akin. It was not one which would catch a casual glance. The subject was mythological: two figures, male and female, in a pastoral setting. Its whole force and its whole significance lay in the woman's face and in the woman's hand.

For a moment he thought it was an odd chance which had brought them to anchor at that spot. Then he glanced at Aimée. She was not looking at him, nor was she looking at the picture; but he knew, without a fleeting doubt, that it was not chance that had played them a trick. She had chosen the seats. He knew, too, that her object in coming to the gallery was here.

His blood stirred and then stilled again. He began to think. Her object was here, but what was her object? To him, more than to most, this picture spoke. Deep in the recesses of his mind it had lain while he was painting his own. Did she know of that picture? He could not remember that she had ever spoken of it. Had she led him here to show him that she had discovered the spring of his inspiration? Or had she a personal motive?

He glanced at her again. She was looking at the painting, affecting to become conscious of it for the first time.

"What a wonderful picture!" she said.

"Admit you have seen it before," said Keith.

"Oh, well, of course I have, like everyone else." Once more there was the distracting element of slight self-consciousness in the frank confession. "Brue says it is the most wonderful picture of its kind that is hung in any exhibition in the world. But I think he is wrong. I think there is one more so."

"Where is that?"

"In the Luxembourg."

Keith looked at her steadily, and she looked at him. "So you have seen that?"

She nodded, but did not take her eyes from his face.

"Did you like it?"

"How like it?"

"Art, at its best, should mirror Nature, should catch the truth in some of her countless faces. In that sense did you like it? Did you like the conception? Did you like the treatment?"

"I liked them both," she answered, "and I felt them both."

Their tones were getting lower. Suddenly his

hand touched hers. She felt all the tense excitement of the angler when a big fish faintly jerks his line. Was the slight contact accidental? Was it a desultory, insignificant touch? Or would his fingers close round hers in clear and unmistakable avowal? While the issue hung, she felt she must not move, must not breathe.

Then, the next moment, all that sense was lost —lost because its tinkling burden was swamped by, and carried away on, the sudden swell of one more sonorous and exacting. The objective was drowned in the subjective. The electric waves that were thrilling the air about them had got hold of her. Her blood leaped. She became the woman of the picture. In a vivid, surging second of intuition, she knew that she was no longer offering him meretricious coin, but the ringing metal of her womanhood.

For a moment he looked round at the painting. His touch still continued on her hand; but she forgot that she was attaining her object, forgot that she was gaining what she had so long striven to gain. All she wanted was to give—give—give.

Then he brought his gaze back to her face, his hand now boldly resting on hers. "They are real, the pictures—this picture and mine?"

She did not speak; but her eyes—held to him by magnetic cords—poignantly, pregnantly looked into his.

The artist in him, which had passed unheeding all her seductive poses, was gripped by the revelation of a genuine emotion. For a time yet it dominated the man.

"I should like to paint you," he said, still holding her hand. "I should like to paint you—like this."

"Yes," she answered, hardly above her breath, "I'll come."

Chapter XV

It was difficult for Aimée to believe that it was only the second time she had been in the studio. It seemed very familiar. The large canvases had been removed, leaving more room, and there was no longer any delusive tea-table, but the warm carpet, the velvet chair-covers, the books, the bear-skin rug on the settee—everything else appeared as she had seen it before, as she had seen it many times since in mental pictures.

There was a change in herself, however. She saw these surroundings with new eyes. Previously she had come from caprice, from bravado, in the careless search for adventure and emotion of an idle and an empty heart; to-day she had come because she was drawn by the compelling magnetism of a man's hand, because she had been thrilled by a touch as she had never been thrilled before by anyone or anything.

She was quite conscious that in returning with Keith to his studio in such circumstances she was throwing herself upon the grace of fortune. He

had proved that he could gain an ascendancy over her which deprived her for the time being of her free-will. He could acquire a lordship which would involve her simple acquiescence in his uttermost demands. She was bereft of the power to affect what might befall: the issue lay in his hands, not in hers.

But she was quite, or all but quite, assured. This private consciousness barely showed in her manner. While the review of her position was passing through her mind, she was removing her hat. Her gloves had already been thrown aside.

"I want a glass," she said. The smallest sign of quivering tension just broke the light note.

He brought one that was used by his models, and held it in front of her.

"Hold it quite still," she said, "and don't look at me over the top. I *must* get my hair right."

Her slim fingers were puffing out sable coils slightly crushed by the hat.

"It doesn't matter," said Keith. "The arrangement is much too up-to-date. I don't think I shall have a modern setting."

"Do you want me to let it all down?" she asked, quite calmly.

"Perhaps, eventually. I'm not quite sure. I'll do your face to-day, and decide how I'll use it

later." He put down the glass. "Now will you take the seat of honour?" He pulled forward the chair usually occupied by his sitters.

"Oh, I can't pose there," said Aimée scornfully. "I should feel like a model sitting in a chair, and nothing else." She dropped peacefully upon the settee and made herself comfortable. "You must paint me here."

"Paint you! I can't even see you."

"Then you must turn me round till you can."

Keith wheeled the settee round until it was standing at right-angles to the fireplace; and then he saw that her intuition was right. She was half reclining along the bear-skin rug, her head buttressed and framed by a great purple cushion. Visions of Cleopatra, of Aspasia, of Herodias, floated through his mind.

"Yes, that's very good—very good indeed." He was moving from one point of observation to another, his brain working rapidly, his words coming casually and mechanically. "Yes—yes. I think so. I must get the light right. Don't move." He pulled up one or two blinds, and drew down one or two others. "Well, perhaps, on the whole. Perhaps—— Yes, it will come best that way. You're comfortable, aren't you?" Finally he

wheeled an easel into position, and began quickly to sketch in her figure, whistling softly.

"Why do you whistle, Mr. Keith?"

"Was I whistling? I'm so sorry." He went on working, and immediately began to whistle again.

"Can't you talk while you paint? Brue talks to me all the time." She was watching him tranquilly.

"Oh, Bruton is a law unto himself." He kept stepping to and from the canvas.

"How much have you done?"

"Nothing as yet. I've only just outlined a figure."

"I like sitting for Brue best," she said, with a hint of her baby manner. "He makes me laugh, and sometimes he makes me angry."

"But I particularly don't want to make you laugh, or to make you angry. I want——"

"What do you want?" The attitude and the air were still languid, but the tone was low and vivid.

He was bending down to a box filled with tubes of colour. He rose slowly and mixed the paint on his palette. Then he approached the easel. "Can you do what I want?"

"Can I, do you think? . . . . But you are so far off. Can you see?"

"Oh, yes."

"Why don't you come nearer?"

He began to paint.

"Why don't you come nearer?" It was repeated very softly.

Suddenly he stopped. With his brush suspended, he looked at her steadily. She was speaking to him, looking at him. What on earth had he been thinking of? He hadn't heard, hadn't understood. This was not a model. He cast off his preoccupation. No model, but a woman, live, real! Speaking to *him,* looking at *him!*

He approached a step—two steps. Her eyes did not turn, the look did not waver. He dropped his palette. The painter had gone: the man had emerged.

He went closer to her. He fell on a knee by the settee, and suddenly snatched her hands.

"You are not posing now?"

She did not speak. Her eyes held upon him, looking straight into his, as if she could not move them.

"You are not posing?" For a moment his speech was tense and breathless.

He bent closer. He was in the zone of the

scent of her. His voice sank and filled—assured, exultant, imperious.

"You are *not* posing now?"

Her arms went round him.

"Oh, no, no, no!"

Chapter XVI

AIMÉE sat and smoked cigarettes in her semi-Oriental boudoir. She had changed her dress since returning from Keith's studio, and was now attired in a soft gown of yellow silk, which amalgamated with her surroundings.

All the drive home she had felt dazed: an unreal woman in an unreal world. She had lain back in her Limousin and let herself be swept along, without heed or thought, curiously remote, curiously diffused, curiously tranquil. The time occupied in getting out of one dress and into another, and the change to the familiar environment of her own room, had restored her to a normal field of mind. For an hour or two she had been the thrall of her senses; now she remembered the object which had brought her into that dominion, and her only feeeling was one of triumph. Howard Keith, the detached, the irresponsive, the immersed in art, was hers—hers! He had proved to be human; she had dragged his humanity out of him. It was not true that she could not bring any man to her feet whom she chose. *It was not true.*

The Wife of Colonel Hughes

She lay back in her low chair, blowing white clouds of smoke, occasionally flicking ash into a tray at her side, occasionally smiling a little, quite happy. The tenuous wreaths stole up to the cornices and dispersed in the slightly perfumed air. The Eastern scheme of this room of hers contained nothing that was cheap or tawdry; there were no flimsy bead curtains or bamboo-tables or fancy octagonal stands. A general sense of Oriental luxury and peace pervaded it: a warm, deep-toned carpet, richly upholstered ottomans and chairs, tiger-skin rugs, Indian silks and embroideries. It was flooded by a subdued rosy light, and fragrant with the faint perfume.

She thought, as she looked round—letting her mind stray, in a kind of contented lull from the fervid subject of her triumph and wander idly over the first ideas suggested by her environment—that one could be thankful for the gift of life, when it was accompanied by wealth and youth and beauty. She was not one of those people who take their personal possession of desirable things as something to which they were somehow pre-natally entitled. She knew that the triple largess of the gods, bestowed upon her, was a piece of rare good fortune, and she felt correspondingly and very genuinely grateful. There were at least a thousand chances to one that, in the draw of conditions of

being, her hand would have extracted a less favourable lot than had actually come to her; and she could only breathe a sigh of deep relief that she had not to draw again. She did not blink her eyes to the fact that the second and third items of her endowment would be withdrawn in due course; and when that time came, she was prepared to take her place, without bitterness, upon a shelf which would be tastefully decked and comfortably cushioned, she hoped, by the first.

At present she regarded that first item least among her possessions, but its value would increase as the others fell by degrees away from her. It was what hosts of men spent their whole lives in a seething struggle to acquire. It provided the incentive to action of more people than all other motives combined. Sitting peacefully in the low chair, watching her smoke-clouds, her thoughts ran for a time along the by-trail started in her mind. Brue had once said to her that if we all had ten thousand a year we should all black our own boots. On the face of it, that was obviously true. In America, where a well-filled purse was a general possession, they had almost reached that state. Yet people bemoaned their lack of money, and looked upon it as a sort of naturally provided lubricant of the wheels of life, of which everyone

was entitled to expect a fair share. What was it for which people pined and struggled and killed each other? Was it the little round coins of various metals, neatly cut and grooved, and stamped with the King's portrait? Those, heaped in piles, would gladden a miser's eyes, or, strung in chains, would make satisfactory ornaments for a savage beauty, but they were not the object of the world strife. What men desired was their purchasing power. Well, what could they purchase? They could buy good food and clothes and entertainment and service. Inquiring a little more deeply, she saw that she could eliminate the first three. When she bought a leg of mutton, she was paying the farmer for rearing a sheep and the butcher for killing it; when she bought a dress, she was paying the weavers for manufacturing the fabric and the sempstresses for giving it form; when she bought a book, she was paying the author for writing it and the printer for printing it. So, all that money could buy was service. It was that for which men yearned, for which they strove so fiercely—the power to make their fellows serve them. When one said, "I wish I had more money," what he really meant was, "I wish I could make more people work for me." And, inquiring still a little more deeply, she saw that he could only attain his wish

by doing more or better work for his fellows. It was all a vast set of mutually supporting and mutually dependent cog-wheels, working round and round. The system was called individualism, but it was really socialism; each part was governed by the whole, and could not exist without the whole. A great trust magnate, who might succeed in acquiring all the world's capital, would bring the entire co-operative structure to the ground, and his personal plight would be no better than that of his neighbours. Such incomes as her own, obtained without doing any work at all, were really eccentricities, altogether outside the scheme: they were a dead weight on the social machinery. Save the abnormal few in possession of them, those who attempted to obtain service without rendering it were criminals, who were punished if they were caught.

The thought did not trouble her. She was thankful that eccentric means of securing service existed, and that she was one of the abnormal few. Then the glowing elation of her mind, in curious contrast with her tranquil attitude, broke forth again in vivid flame. She had conquered. Of course, she had conquered. How absurd of Howard Keith to suppose that she could submit to be ignored, to suppose that she could not make him

bring his homage to her temple! Never yet had she failed to compel a man to bow his head when she had chosen to try. In this case a little more time than usual had been needed, and she had had to take more trouble. For that the day of reckoning was at hand. Surely he should repay her, in humiliation and in disappointment, for his previous neglect. His punishment should be well proportioned to his offence.

Perhaps she had gone rather far that afternoon. She threw away the end of her cigarette and took another. Well, of course she knew she had gone distinctly far. One could not catch big fish with small bait. It would not matter. It was spasmodic and involuntary, an isolated indiscretion, and he was not a babbler. She could pique him, scorn him, laugh at him, and he would not open his lips. She was safe. And assuredly she should have to discourage him now—to snub him firmly and persistently—not only to requite his slights, but to escape a scandal.

Presently another thought struck her. Supposing she were required to pay for her victory in a way which would bear witness of its price? Supposing she were subpoenaed in her own impeachment? She laughed. Well, in that case, without doubt, her capitulation to Chester would have to

be complete and unqualified. She would have to accept his terms with the becoming meekness of a submissive wife. Then suddenly there came a check to the flow of her thoughts: she began to be afraid. A heat flushed through her and came out on her brow. *She could not do it.* She could not deceive him to that extent. She could not plant a living lie upon him—upon him and his family for ever.

As the flush slowly ebbed, the handle of her door was turned softly, and Hughes himself came quietly in. He was already dressed.

"Oh, dear," she complained lazily, "is it time to dress?"

"I am a little early." He smiled at her with a mixture of playfulness and solicitude, curling his hands together in front of him, one beneath the other. "You seem very sol-i-tary, Kitty. How are you amusing yourself, sitting here all alone?"

"I was just thinking," said Aimée.

Chapter XVII

KEITH tore up the note without passion, but with firm, deliberate action of his fingers and wrists which indicated quiet determination. A week had passed since Aimée's visit to his studio, and this was the second reply he had received from her during that period, offering him an excuse for not coming to continue her sitting. The first time there was just a chance that some engagement absolutely impossible to escape had genuinely intervened, but now there was no longer any doubt that she was avoiding him intentionally. He had not mentioned painting. He did not want to paint her, but he wanted to talk to her. Knowing that —knowing, too, the paramount reason there was that they should talk, she had sent him the kind of note that she might have written to a social bore who had asked her to tea.

He was not a man who was capable of a casual, passing amour. Devoted to his work, he had got into the jog-trot of matrimonial routine, and it would not have occurred to him, if left to himself,

that he was eligible for any more poignant and more exacting sexual life. He had not sought Aimée. She had plunged into his orbit, and by the reality of her own glowing forces had suddenly impregnated and vivified the emotional side of his nature, long dormant. And in proportion to the depth of its previous quiescence the springing sensibility was strong, significant, compelling. He could have taken it lightly no more than he could have taken his work lightly. It could only be dominant or not exist. It ranged itself in front of his domestic ties, in front even of his art. He had been sprung, almost cheated, into a liaison, but the accomplished fact, however effected, took hold of his being.

Now, it seemed, she sought to forget what she had exacted and what she had given, to return to yesterday as if to-day had never been. But he had penetrated a little more deeply into her real character than perhaps she had yet penetrated herself. What was not a trifle to him—what was not a trifle in fact—should not be a trifle to her. In a tempestuous moment he had thrown everything to the winds for her sake, and he intended to hold her to the compact she had then tacitly made.

He walked slowly up and down the studio. On

the easel stood the nebulous beginning of the portrait of Aimée, as he had left it at the moment when the current of his life had changed, her figure roughly indicated, her outlined face empty and pallid as the empty and pallid canvas. He knew that it could never be completed, that it could never even be continued. Conditions which had produced an emotional storm, which had led to unforgetable moments, could not be renewed with that knowledge in their minds. Whatever the future course of their lives might be, the picture would remain permanently the shadow product of one short and broken sitting. He should not paint over it, and it occurred to him, as he stood in front of it, that future collectors of curios might stand in front of it in the same way, and wonder how the blank spaces and the crude splashes of neutral colour were to have been treated. Then he took it off the easel, and stacked it with other discarded canvases in a corner.

That evening, after dining at a restaurant, he made his way on foot to Curzon Street. It was necessary for him to see Aimée, and this was the only means left to him. He would have preferred, in the circumstances, to have refrained from visiting her husband's house; but, since the mountain would not come to Mahomet, Mahomet had to

reconcile his mind to a pilgrimage to the mountain.

The footman who answered his ring made a correctly indefinite response to his inquiry, and left him in the hall while he went upstairs. It was an inviting hall—warmly carpeted, sumptuously furnished, bright with brass and copper. The thought crossed his mind, as he looked round, that Aimée would make some sacrifice when she exchanged her present material conditions for others which, though sufficient to content reasonable taste, could not attain this plane of luxury.

The footman came back in a few moments and informed him, with the same colourless, punctilious air, that his mistress was not at home. The phrase was obviously used in its social sense. Keith had no doubt that the man had been speaking to her. He asked for a sheet of paper, and was shown a writing-table. Sitting down, he wrote seven words—"*I shall wait here till you come*"—and put them in an envelope. This he handed to the man.

"Will you please give that to Mrs. Hughes?" he said.

While he was waiting for the result of this message, Hughes came out of one of the rooms on the ground floor, and crossed the hall on his

way to the stairs. Seeing Keith, he came up to him hospitably.

"Why, how do you do, Mr. Keith? Won't you come upstairs? We have some friends with us—very informally. You would be a great ac-quis-i tion."

Under the strain of the momentous issue that was engrossing him, Keith hardly received any impression of the courteous little man. He was conscious that he was speaking—asking him something; that was all. He took a moment or two to gather his thoughts.

"Thank you very much," he answered, a little vaguely. "I was waiting to see Mrs. Hughes. She is kindly giving me a few sittings, and I want to make some arrangements."

"Ah, yes. I'm sure they cannot have told her you are here. Do please sit down, and I will see to it. Let me congratulate you on the big picture —a brilliant achieve-ment."

Smiling and complimentary, he turned away up the steps; and another space of waiting followed. Then Keith heard a slight swish and tinkle of drapery on the floor above. The next moment, swiftly and smoothly, Aimée swept down the stairs, shimmering in the thin texture of an Indian shawl covered with shining points of beaten silver,

Her head was held arrogantly up, and Keith could see that she was violently angry. She passed him without speaking, almost without appearing to see him, and led the way to the Oriental boudoir. He followed her calmly into the room and closed the door. Instantly she turned and faced him.

"How dare you? How dare you come like this? How dare you threaten to make a scene?"

"One who drives another to take an undesirable course," he answered, quite quietly, "cannot feel aggrieved when that course is taken. Why did you refuse to come and see me?"

"Because I felt no particular inclination." The fire in her voice had changed to studied disdain. "Besides, if we continue to meet, it will make a scandal."

"A scandal!" He looked at her with astonishment, even partly with amusement. "Are you afraid of scandal?"

"Obviously one doesn't want to be talked about." Her tone was still on the plane of lofty detachment.

"I'm sorry," he answered, slowly and quite sincerely; "because I don't know how we are to come through this without a considerable scandal."

"To come through what?" She was startled to an acute tone and an intent look.

"That is rather a silly question."

"You haven't answered it."

"When two streams have once converged," he said, suddenly adopting a sterner and sharper note, "do you suppose they can flow apart? Do you suppose they can ever again be divided into their separate waters?"

"What *do* you mean?"

"Why affect to misunderstand?"

"Are you mad?" She was staring at him increduously.

"We may both have been mad to let it come to this," he answered. "But we cannot undo what has been done. For us the future is a joint future. We have crossed the Rubicon, and we cannot return." Suddenly he took a step towards her. "Do you *want* to return?" he asked pregnantly.

She drew a little away. She was beginning to be afraid of him—to be afraid of her own acts. Lightly she had put a spark to gunpowder. Lightly she had brought a force into being to act against herself—a force which gave her a chilling premonition of helplessness, which filled her with a vague apprehension that it might prove to be strong enough to impose its will upon her.

"I never thought of anything else," she replied, after waiting a few moments to subdue this feeling.

She was still looking at him. "I don't understand you in the least. We were foolish perhaps—we lost our heads—but you are making a great fuss about a little thing."

"A little thing!" The words fell slowly, and again he moved towards her. "You fancy yourself to be a trivial, shallow woman, heartless and thoughtless. You have to learn that you are not. You have to learn, and I have to teach. That is what lies before us."

"You are prepared to leave your wife, and you expect me to leave my husband."

"If we were to think of those, we should have thought of them before. It is too late now. You and I are swept together and on by a paramount claim that tosses all other considerations aside like wisps of straw on the wind." He was speaking quickly now, on a strong tide of emotional force.

"All because I kissed you!" She was facing him rather like an animal at bay, with appeal as well as defiance in her eyes.

"Because you kissed me in *that* way, because you sought me, and because you cannot do without me."

"Rot!" She still brazened it out.

"You cannot, Aimée."

He grasped her hands, easily overcoming her efforts to snatch them away.

She struggled passionately, twisting and wrenching her wrists in his unrelaxing grip. "Let me go!" she panted, in hot, tense underbreaths. "I'll shout. I'll make a scene. I'll call my husband."

"Do as you like. You know what you will have to confess."

"You coward!"

He stretched her arms and bent them slowly back till they nearly met behind her. Holding her thus, so that she could not move, he bent forward, following her fiercely resentful face as she withdrew it to the last extremity in her physical power, and pressed his lips upon hers. He held the thrilling pressure until she returned the kiss. Then he let her go.

She stood for a few moments motionless, then quietly dropped into a chair.

Presently she raised her eyes. There was neither hate nor anger in them. "You must not stay here," she said.

He knelt down by her chair. "Is that little roughness forgiven?"

"You hurt my hand."

He took them both. "Which one?"

"This most." She put it up, and he kissed it.

"We still have to talk."

"I'll come to the studio."

"To-morrow?"

"Let it be the next day?" Her eyes suddenly pleaded. "I want to think."

"Yes, yes."

When he had gone, she tried to think how it had all come about. She seemed not to know herself. She had danced lightly and buoyantly through scores of affairs with men: men had been her field ever since she had let her skirts down. This was different from anything that had ever happened to her before.

She had been forced to pay. A man had deprived her of her will. She had given out—to gain—and she could not take back.

Chapter XVIII

SHE had given out—to gain—and she could not take back. That was the matter. She knew now that she could not do without Howard Keith. All the months that he had been the object upon which her mind was projected, all she had thought and done, as well as all she had given, now held her to him. She had tried to break away, and he had shown her that she could not do it. She had kissed him because he was utterly dear to her and desirable; and she had known, somewhere within her, when he followed her into the room, and when she turned upon him with flaming anger and saw his face, that she must kiss him, and that she should kiss him, before he left. For the first time in her life she had completely relinquished herself, for the first time her whole being was engrossed and lifted. She was thrilled by strange happiness, by the appreciation of something in the world which she had not before realized that it contained. Her life hitherto suddenly stretched before her in a new light and made her feel ashamed. It was all

little, all childish, a foolish playing with things that were not meant for play. The butterfly metaphor occurred to her; flitting irresponsibly, catching at the enjoyment of the moment, dashing its wings and coming to earth. And she began to perceive dimly—with a curious feeling of peace, of thankfulness—that there were faculties within her which made possible something greater than a butterfly life. She was not without latent altruistic traits, without talents, without humanity, but she had given them no room or opportunity for growth. She searched the years she had fluttered through for ought that stood definitely and permanently to her credit. She remembered a few isolated acts of charity, which had not cost her much, and which generally had been spiced with some entertaining occupation—she remembered, once at school, bearing the blame for another's fault; once taking up a footsore child in her car and dropping her at her mother's house; once or twice, at Brackett, with lifted skirts and distressed senses, getting inside the cottage of a villager who was ill: and that was all.

This that had happened was a tremendous turn in her life—and not only in her life, but in herself—and, somehow, at the end, it had come suddenly. Suddenly, in a way; but she saw now that

her attitude for the last week had been fictitious; she had set up an unreal condition of mind, and made herself believe in it. Since the incident of the studio, she had been Keith's as completely as he had been hers.

And what of the future? The immensity and the shattering effect of the change that was offered her held her on the brink of it, dazed and afraid. She did not quite realize it herself, but the course that her thoughts took evidenced a changed outlook and a changing character. Had they both been free, she would have put her hand in her lover's and have gone with him wherever he chose, though they were both penniless. But they were neither of them free. Keith's hand was still waiting for her, in spite of that, his shoulder to rest upon, his arm to shield her, his brain to work for her, and his voice to guide her feet. He did not withhold; he sacrificed everything and proffered everything. He advanced upon his new responsibilities, without hesitation, over the ruins of the old. That might betoken a certain callousness; but it was the action of a man who gripped his life with no wavering hand, a man of definite force of character, who did not shally, and who did not shrink.

She did not doubt that she could be happy with him. It would mean social banishment—she knew

that—social banishment for a time, and, at the best, semi-acceptance later. There are certain women whom England has consented to take to its heart in spite of their flagrant offense against the most rigid of its canons. Nell Gwynn is one, Lady Hamilton is another. They are very few; and she would not be one. She winced at the scandal and ostracism, but she could brace herself to meet them with Howard Keith. Social banishment with him—with him always—would be better than life without him. She loved her luxuries, but she could suffer the loss of her great possessions. The stately houses, the retinue of servants, the dreary dinners she had always hated, the local pomp she had always ignored—these things dwindled to trifling significance when seen beside the full vista of new hopes and devotions opened before her. It seemed to her that she had been watching, with unemotional satisfaction, the antics of the harlequins and columbines; and that now the drop-scene behind them, which had seemed to bound the view, had rolled up and revealed, in unsuspected, breathless beauty, a limitless depth of spring woodland beyond.

She did not doubt that she could be happy with him; she wanted, more than she had ever wanted anything in her life, to enter with him and explore, and to go on exploring through long days and

years, that bowery mystery; but—Chester had been very good to her, and she admired Mrs. Keith. She saw their wrecked lives. They would be wrecked completely, because they were both people whose beings were centered in their homes, whose ideas were immutably riveted in the ordered forms of the social régime, and who would not be able to rise from the ashes of their wasted images.

On the one hand were their broken homes, on the other the consuming separation of two people who had met too late. She began to wonder if it would not be possible to save both in a measure by a compromise. She need not go away with Keith, but she could often see him, often find excuses to pass her time with him, keep him for her own. Brue had once said to her that "lots of them did"—even in England. In France it would be considered almost a necessary corollary of a marriage such as hers. But this was not France. Here people had lorgnettes and tongues and cold shoulders of a peculiarly aggressive type. Even the best-bred amongst them had not yet realized the bad form of concerning themselves with the personal affairs of their neighbours. She would not be able frankly to acknowledge an intimate friendship with Keith, candidly to be seen with him with any frequency. They would be involved in a life of assignations and devices, of surreptitious cor-

respondence, of trickery and deception. The very methods of their intercourse would make the intercourse seem shameful. If Chester should get to know of it, he would cast her off, not angrily, but dumbly, wth shattered ideals and a heart turned to lead. Truly, a rupture brought about by such jagged means would be far worse for everyone than a severance compelled now by one clean cut.

Howard Keith had seen all that—the self-degrading duplicity and the more bitter pain that must almost inevitably come in the end. He was wiser than she. And yet—if she left him—Chester would resign his seat in Parliament, perhaps he would close Brackett—Chester, who had given her so much, and who had taken so much thought of her.

Every path seemed full of difficulty and trial. For two days she thought, till she was weary of thinking, and by the time she reached Keith's studio on the afternoon of the second day she had no more definite purpose in her mind than to ask for time.

He was alone, waiting for her. As he admitted her, she met his glance confidingly, but without speaking. Then she took her old place on the settee, and he quietly sat down beside her.

She gave him her two hands simply. "I do love you," she said, "but I cannot go away with you."

He unfastened her gloves and drew them off from the wrists, rolling them inside out. Then he held the uncovered hands firmly and gently within his own, and looked at her.

"I don't think those two propositions can run in double harness," he said.

"Well—but I think they must."

"They will kick and struggle, and eventually the tackle will give way, and then there will be a far greater debacle than if no attempt had been made to yoke them."

"It's such an awful plunge."

"Yes." He paused, still looking at her. "It's very much for you to give up."

"It's not that. I would give it all up for you," she said simply.

"Aimée!" He drew her nearer, his eyes filled with tenderness and lighted with exultation.

"Oh—Howard—I would, I would!"

She yielded to him, she sank upon him, a safe harbour from the storm of her thoughts. His arms folded her closer and closer. His lips pressed hers.

"Then that settles it," he said, now holding her, resting, within his shoulder. "There is no more to be said."

"Oh yes, a lot more."

"Well?"

"Don't think me a hypocrite. I'm not. I think I've changed in the last few days. But oughtn't we think of others—at least, of two others—besides ourselves?"

"Yes, and that is almost the main reason why it is necessary to put an end to the existing state of things. We owe it to them not to deceive them. If we tried to maintain present conditions under the altered circumstances, we should be living a lie—even though you and I were to find it somehow possible to resist the unceasing strain to one another, and not to meet again. Our whole lives would be false—permeated with falsehood. Day after day and year after year we should be acting a part, pretending to be something we were not, holding a secret in our minds and an obsession in our hearts absolutely inimical to the relations of husband and wife."

"Yes." She played with the artist-hand that ended the arm that encircled her. "But I have been thinking and thinking, and I seem to see that it would be worse if we left them. Chester would be broken down—I know he would—he would turn into an old man—partly because he cares for me, and more because of the disgrace."

"That was a chance he took when he married you—a much younger woman than himself, and one quite out of sympathy with his tastes and

ideas. I'm not callous. I hate to feel that he must suffer. This is a world full of disharmonies. Conditions are perpetually being produced where suffering is inevitable, however we act. Heaven knows why it is so. All we can do is not to fall below our own judgment, to start with a definite conception of right conduct, and to follow it without wavering through all eventualities."

"But how do you know your judgment is right?"

"I don't. We are all fallible. The best of us can only use the precarious portion of brain that has been dealt out to him. We are all liable to be wrong, but each is as likely to be right as another. If a hundred men tell you a thing is right, and you think it is wrong, you must not do it. Our own consciences are our only tribunal."

"Then, if you tell me it is right that I should go away with you, and I think it is wrong, I must not go?"

"No. But you don't think it is wrong; you only think it would make others suffer."

"I know it would—Chester and Mrs. Keith. Mrs. Keith would suffer, too, and she is so nice. I don't know why you married her—you—but she is so nice."

"Her life would scarcely be changed. Motherhood has always meant very much to her, and wifehood very little. She would be provided for,

and she would have the children. The little regret, the little shock, would soon pass."

"Oh, there must be something more than that. She *must* care for you."

He laughed a little, and pressed her close to him. "Must she? Are you sure your opinion about that is quite to be depended upon?"

"After living together in intimate companionship all those years."

"Perhaps that's the best of reasons to the contrary. Wait till you have known me so long and so well."

"Oh, I know your faults," said Aimée.

"Do you? What are they?"

"You're frightfully self-centered. It makes you forget the most ordinary courtesies, and sometimes turns you into a downright boor. You possess a very high opinion of your abilities and importance, and probably are as obstinate as a pig. Once you had made up your mind about anything, you would stick to your own way of thinking or acting in the face of every kind of opposition, and whatever the cost."

"Probably all the more strongly for that reason," he admitted. "Still, in spite of all that——"

"Oh, I would risk you," said Aimée, partly turning round.

"Then sit still and listen," said Keith, putting

her back into her old place. "All this talk about personal feeling and personal consequences does not touch the real event, which is so dominating that nothing else can be considered beside it. However much she may care for me, and however much he may care for you, and whatever may be the effects of a breach, it is unthinkable that we can continue to live with them after what has happened. Rightly or wrongly, we have sealed a new bond irrevocably."

"I have not lived with Chester," said Aimée, "in the way you mean since before I met you."

This was news to Keith. He heard it with considerable astonishment, and took some time to digest it. "But why?" he asked, after a long pause.

"I've behaved badly." Again she played with his hand.

"Tell me how."

"You see, he has an old family, and he wants to continue it. Besides, he's fond of children. And I—well, I wouldn't."

"Why not?"

"Oh, I know it sounds horribly selfish"—she threw back her head—"but I didn't want the bother."

"Don't you like children?"

"Yes, when they are in existence."

"Supposing it had been I?"

She laughed softly, and screwed her shoulders into him. "As many as you liked," she said, pressing his hand to her lips.

"Then it was only because your love for him wasn't strong enough, or wasn't of the right kind?"

"Yes, or because his wasn't."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I can't tell you—I mean, I won't."

"Never mind. You couldn't from him: You could from me. That's another sign-post to guide you—almost the clearest of all."

She nestled closer to him, sinking her head sideways till the sable sheaves of hair he had chaffed her about on that very settee touched his cheek, bent to meet them. "I don't want time ever to move on from now," she said irrelevantly. "I want to keep just like this always."

For several minutes neither of them spoke. A tall clock in a corner of the studio ticked, ticked.

"It would be no good breaking the clock," Aimée murmured. "Why won't time cease passing? While we are sitting still we are moving and changing. We are getting older, our clothes are getting shabbier, and the furniture is getting nearer to the time when it falls to pieces. Think how the earth goes tirelessly on, round and round the sun. How often has it been round, I wonder, and how often has it still to go? How do we know

there is such a thing as time? We just take it for granted. We can't even conceive there not being time. Yet it must end somehow. What makes it? What makes anything? Howard"—suddenly she sat up, out of his embrace—"let me stay with him."

"I would never take you against your will."

"It would not be against my will I want *you* —just you, and no one else at all. I didn't know before how lovely the world could be if there were only two people on it. I wish we could find a new planet somewhere."

"You are not afraid of me?"

"Oh no."

"Or of the world?"

"No."

"You would trust me and brave it?"

"Yes."

"Then go home, pack your things, write your letters, and meet me at Charing Cross for the boat-train to-morrow."

"To-morrow?" The word came slowly, divided into its syllables, her deep, dark eyes, wide open, looking at him, and yet not at him, slightly turned in upon herself, in a shock of amazement and joy and doubt, her lips a little parted in breathless expense.

Then she laughed. "Oh, that's absurd!"

"Why?" The short query was uttered in a tone of quiet dignity.

"I can't do it in that way. I should have to make excuses and arrangements, to tie up all my loose ends, to provide some ostensible reason for leaving home, so as to save Chester's position with the servants, and so on."

"How long will all that take?"

"Oh, I don't know. I want to feel more sure. Why should we be in such a hurry? We have all our lives before us. Let us wait for a time—for a few months, at any rate."

"That's rather foolish. It means only that you will be shivering on the brink, putting off the plunge that *must* come sooner or later."

"Yes, perhaps, but—— Can't you understand? *Do* understand. It's a silly phrase, but I want to get used to the idea."

"In the meantime our lives would be entirely artificial. Don't you see it? I couldn't go out to Richmond compatibly with the least self-respect. Even Sundays I should have to try to avoid."

She caught the two sides of his coat and pulled him towards her. "Yes, but do it for me? Give me a few months? A few months before I give you everything?"

He looked gravely into her eyes. He was very reluctant.

"It's the first thing I've asked you."

Her face was turned up to him. Her lips were distinctly accessible. She shook him. Suddenly her eyes lost their seriousness, their appeal, and became playfully seductive. "Seal the bond."

At last he smiled. "I'm being persuaded to do something which I think is a mistake, because a woman asks nicely. It's very contemptible."

Then, firmly and without ambiguity, he impressed his sign.

Chapter XIX

It was curious—and rather stringent of fate, Aimée felt—that Hughes should choose that night, after her return from the studio, to revert to the subject which he had patiently shelved for two or three months. She had asked him for time, just as she had asked Keith for time; and now the first of her post-dated drafts fell due, and was presented for payment. Dinner had passed in its usual stately calm, without the smallest suspicion on the part of the master of the house that the exquisite and tranquil wife sitting opposite him had recently been debating whether it should be the last she would ever eat with him, and that the question had come within an ace of being answered in the affirmative. He had talked in his customary gentle, prosy way about events of the day, offering reflections neither profound nor enterprising, but quite unexceptional and most carefully phrased. Afterwards, he had gone to the House. And now, having found Aimée alone in the drawing-room

when he returned, he had taken the opportunity to reopen this question of the perpetuation of the race in general, and of the Brackett Hugheses in particular.

The first words struck upon Aimée with a shock of self-discernment, of self-cognition. When any kind of variation has been effected in our facial appearance, though we are quite conscious of it, it never completely comes home to us until we look in the mirror. So Chester's overt reversion to the subject which had been between them so long was the mirror which showed Aimée, in clear and unmistakable fact, the definite and deep reality of the change that had taken place in her. Her original refusal to suffer the stress and ties of motherhood had been dictated simply by disinclination to renounce her life of light-hearted pleasure, and had been privately qualified, no doubt, by some semi-conscious intention to give way after a few years of freedom. She realized now that that was no longer a cause, but a pretext. It must be persisted in as an excuse for separation. She must cling to it pertinaciously, desperately, to maintain the only condition in which her continued presence under her husband's roof was now possible.

"I don't think it's any good to keep going back to it, Chester," she said, in her old bored manner, which she knew was now affected. "I don't feel

the least bit more like it than I did, and somehow I don't think I ever shall. It just isn't in me."

This uncompromising statement, though uttered in a tone of careless ennui, was really impelled from her by the urgency of the situation. She could not take a risk of any kind of patch-up. Far from being as indifferent as she seemed to the pain she was giving him, she felt it acutely. The heavy cloud that passed over his face struck her like a blow. She knew that in a few lightly spoken words she was casting a permanent blight upon him, denuding him of the supreme hope of his life. If it had been possible to grant his desire, except through a medium that she could not contemplate, she would have granted it. The irksomeness and the suffering were not now the obstacles. She realized that that slow eating into her self-respect, by corrosive duplicity, which Keith had told her would be a necessary consequence of her continued life with Chester, was already beginning.

Hughes rested his elbow on the mantelpiece, and ran his fingers through his grey hair. "Ah, Kit-ty," he said—there was exquisite disappointment in his voice, but no anger—"I fear you were mistaken in yourself when you married."

"Oh, Chester!" She got up and stood beside him. "Can't you get rid of me somehow? I haven't any right to your name or your home. I

think our marriage was rather an irrational business, wasn't it?"

"Sh-h-h!" He deprecated the speech with a motion of his hand. Then he sat down, and for a few moments was silent. "I cannot believe that you understand yourself," he said at last. "Don't you think that, if you were to look at yourself and your responsibilites a little more seriously—I want you to try, Kitty—that you would find that the instinct which is so rarely absent in women, even the least domestic, is really latent in you."

"I'm sure I shouldn't." Again she assumed the air of tedium. "I suppose I must be some kind of freak who ought never to have been born. I simply can't bear children."

In her anxiety to convince him of the futility of pressing her, she was rather overdoing it. He looked at her with new concern, and, for the first time, with a little censure. "I'm afraid you are allowing the repugnance to grow upon you," he said.

She passed it off with a laugh. "Well, it doesn't get any better, does it? In some ways I'm improving, though." She lighted a cigarette, blew a whiff, and held it in her fingers. "I've been thinking that I should like to take more interest in the things that interest you—to help in them. I could open bazaars, and give away prizes, and sit on platforms

—I wouldn't mind trying to make little speeches. Then I could go and see the tenants' wives—not in a casual, bored way, but be friendly with them. I can always understand anything if I decide to trouble about it; I could get to talk about poultry and dairy things quite easily and knowledgeably. I'm not joking, Chester. Truly and honestly, I want to."

Hughes looked at her face, almost eager in its expression, with some suspicion. "It is rather a sudden conversion, Kit-ty."

Again, lest he should perceive how real was her desire to serve him, and wonder at the change in her, she adopted the old nonchalant manner which she did not feel. She was leaning lightly on the mantelpiece, almost touching him. "You see, I'm getting old, Chester—old and humdrum—like you, you silly old thing. We shall soon be a Darby and Joan."

"Sometimes I could almost wish you were, Kitty," he answered. "At present, I fear, you are still much too young and charming."

"Well, that will please the constituents all the more. I'll shake hands with them all till my gloves are black. And if there was somebody very nice and very doubtful, I would buy a vote at that price"—she touched his cheek with her lips—"if you asked me particularly."

She succeeded in making him smile—a little sadly, but still to smill. "Um-m-m!" he murmured in his pensive, paternal tone. "I think, if we cannot retain our seat in Par-lia-ment wthout resorting to those methods, we must be content to remain outside."

"But you'll let me help, Chester?" She broke her ash, carefully trimming the edges on the tray. He had no suspicion how tense was the anxiety beneath her casual exterior.

"Of course, my dear—if you really wish it—when we return to Brackett."

He said good-night and took his way to bed. She watched his small figure go out of the room. His very walk proclaimed his kindly nature. There was something solicitous even in his short, characteristic stride. She wondered if it were her fancy —suggesting what might be expected—or if a little of the sprightliness had gone out of it of late. To-night, undoubtedly, though it was still held straight, there was heavy dejection in the back which moved rather more slowly than usual through the door, and almost a mute reproof in the arm which pulled it quietly to close behind him.

She dropped back into her chair, crossed one knee over the other, and put her cigarette into her mouth. It made her feel dejected, too, but she did not intend to show it.

The next day, as she was driving down Regent street, she chanced to see Bruton, and, in spite of some protest on his part, picked him up and carried him home with her.

"It's not for your sake for once," she said, opening the door herself; "it's for mine."

"The subtle flattery slides into my soul," he said, getting in slowly. "But you had better tell him to go through back-streets and mewses."

"Why such unsavoury stealth?"

"Well, this isn't a Wednesday."

Aimée had forgotten all about Chester's trifling objection to her too frequent visits to Bruton's studio. She laughed. "I see; public flaunting of our deep attachment on Wednesdays, and secret manœuvring for the rest of the week."

"That's the most ordinary providence. An uninterrupted course of public flaunting would rub more than the edge off any attachment, however deep. That's what's the matter with marriage. If I had a wife, I should lodge her in a nunnery, and climb in the window in the dead of night."

"I'm so glad I met you," said Aimée, leaning back contentedly in the car. "I did so want somebody to talk like this."

"To give you these golden words of wisdom?"

"Just this absolute r-rot." The French "r" rippled softly.

"Oh, is it? There's a proverb or an aphorism, or whatever you call it, to the effect that there is many a true word spoken in jest. Now, you are a married woman."

"I don't deny it."

"And, in present circumstances, the unvarying routine of connubial ease results in a certain amount of—tedium?"

"A certain amount."

"Remove yourself from those circumstances. Put yourself into a nunnery, under a Mother-Superior with a heavy scowl, and with half a hundred particularly sanctimonious Sisters, capable of exploding with horror at the mere mention of a man —put yourself into those surroundings, and then listen, in the middle of the night, to your husband fiddling about outside with a ladder and a whistle. Imagine your excitement."

"Do you mean Chester?"

"Well, he's the only husband you've got."

"You're impious, Brue," said Aimée, trying not to laugh.

"Are you losing your sense of humour?"

"I don't see anything humorous in the thought of poor Chester attacking a nunnery at night with a ladder and a whistle."

"Oh yes, you do."

"Oh well, I *do*—but I don't want to."

"Has he been putting another hundred on the dress allowance."

"He would put on anything I liked. He has given me everything I've asked for—every little thing."

"Much more of this, and you'll make me jealous. One can't compete on the chance sales of pictures and the crude commercial ideas of the proprietors of illustrated journals."

They reached the house, and walked through the hall to the boudoir. It was a warm day, and all the windows were open, a light breeze gently blowing the small yellow silk curtains. Aimée took off her hat unceremoniously and dropped it on a chair, then called upon Bruton to comment upon the condition of her hair.

"It's all right," said he, after looking at it perfunctorily.

She puffed it out with her fingers. "Is that better?"

"No, a little worse." He was leaning with his back on the mantelpiece. "The spare tyre on the port bow is out of focus."

"What am I to extract from that jumble of metaphors?" She pushed up the wisp on the left side

of her forehead. "But, of course, you don't know how it ought to be."

"I join issue. I've painted it too often to have the least doubt on the subject. I know every twist and every turn."

"Do you know, Brue," she said, sitting down, "I think I'll have you paint my portrait. It will be a reason for coming to the studio. You talk so frivolously, and I want to be made to feel frivolous."

"That would mean a lot of spade-work."

"Don't be horrid. Lately I've begun to feel that things matter, and I think it's rather silly."

"It's very silly. What has happened? Is there a slump in scalps?"

"Oh, I don't know. It was rather rotten of me to think it was fun to take scalps. It was a very feeble way of spending one's life. Wasn't it, Brue?"

"You are beginning to be in love with your husband, and to think that other men have a right to be left alone." He took a chair by her side. "If you'll assure me it isn't the dress allowance, I shall feel happier."

"It only means that you gradually isolate yourself. Men pass and pass, and I've been thinking that I've no women friends—really—not one."

"No; you've put 'cold shoulder' on the menu just a little too often."

"Would you like me to turn into a domestic woman, with nurseries and measles and Christmas-trees and a scolding tongue?"

"At present you would hardly harmonize with the background."

"I could be very fond of children, Brue. I should like to have, say, two—or three."

"Now, honestly, if you mean that, I'm uncommonly glad. You have, to tell the truth, been a little rough on him."

Aimée got up to look for some cigarettes. Apparently she could not find what she wanted. She moved slowly about the room, moving and lifting things on tables and in cabinets, humming.

"Oh, here are the chocolates, though," she said, still with her back to him. "Will you have one?"

Brue duly declined. She returned to her seat, and held up a particularly fat one for his inspection between her finger and thumb, then popped it in her mouth.

"Chocolates always make me think of Bertie Legard," she said. "I wish I hadn't treated him quite so casually. I wonder if he really minded. He is such a genuine and loyal old boy."

"So far as I could see, you were a poor second to the new mare."

"Oh, but he has been in London since then. He went with me to the Academy, and——" She took

another chocolate. "What about doing the portrait, Brue?"

"Are you honestly a runner?"

She nodded, her mouth filled with the sweet.

"But I don't pretend to paint portraits. I'm not the right man."

She finished the chocolate. "Well, you must begin some time, mustn't you?"

"There are men who get through life without painting portraits."

"There are architects who get through life without building a church, and playwrights who get through life without staging a play. Why jeer at them in the pomp of your first order?"

"I thought you were sitting for Keith? I saw a thing in his studio, very much in embryo, which he said was going to be you."

Aimée stretched herself, and again got up. She knelt on a chair, with her elbows on a windowsill, looking out to the sunshine.

"I don't suppose that will ever be finished," she said

"Why not?"

"It was only a momentary thought. He is far too busy, with more important things, to go on with it."

Her eyes rested on a young plane-tree, clear green yet, even in its London environment. She

was lying. She had lied to Chester, and now she was lying even to Brue. Her life, Keith had said, would be a living lie.

"That's the woman I was trying to label in my mind," said Brue suddenly. "You said just now you hadn't any women friends. Well, what about Mrs. Keith? You know her, don't you?"

"Of course I know her. You made me go and call on her at Richmond."

"Oh, did I? Well, didn't you like her?"

"I liked her very much."

She was clenching her hands and her teeth, the hated tears on the point of starting, her muscles tense, willing him, with a pain of vehemence, to stop.

"I was only thinking," Brue went on, leaning back in his chair, "that, in case your present frame of mind should by any chance continue, she is the sort of a woman you could make a friend of with some comfort. There's something reliable about her. She's neither shallow nor narrow nor advanced, and she's very kind-hearted and jolly. She would be stable."

Aimée did not answer. When the silence had lasted nearly a minute, he turned his head and looked at her.

He got up slowly, with a feeling of incredulity,

of bewilderment. He laid his hand on her very gently.

"Aimée, Aimée, old girl!"

She brushed him off angrily, still without speaking, and, without turning her face, fled from the room.

Chapter XX

AGAIN and again, after that afternoon with Bruton, Aimée asked herself how she was to profit or to benefit anybody by what Keith had called this "shivering on the brink." She had had a feeling that, somehow or other, the situation would solve itself in time. In books, very often, obstacles and intricacies melted away, and everything ended in a sort of subdued and growing sunshine. She would come to the last page as a woman who had been very foolish and thoughtless and made many mistakes, but who had resisted a great temptation, and who eventually had her reward. She began to think that the people who wrote fiction must have lived in some other world, where things were more appropriately arranged. If she were writing her life, instead of living it, she would have to go through a great deal of suffering and chastening for several years. Because, first of all, she would have to force herself somehow to give Chester an heir, and then Chester would die, and then Mrs. Keith would have to die. In the last chapter she

would marry Keith, and, as a slight appropriate retribution for the way she had treated her husband, she would have his three children to look after as well as Chester's, and perhaps Providence, further, would deny them one belonging to them jointly. But still she would be happy, almost perfectly happy. It would be a rather pretty ending, and the book would provide food for thought for women who took their matrimonial responsibilities too lightly. The novelist who played the part of deputy Providence usually did it very well.

When she looked at the facts, however, as a breathing woman in an actual world, she could see no reason whatever for thinking that the course of events would flow through pain to final peaceful, chastened respectability. Mrs. Keith obviously enjoyed the best of health, and Chester was full of the abounding vigour of a small physique. Nor could she imagine, in her own living person, the fulfilment even of the first condition. When Bruton had deprecated, in his quiet, matter-of-fact way, her treatment of her husband, it had gone home acutely. If he, who was not influenced in any way by sentimentality, thought she had behaved badly, there could be no doubt that she had done so. Should she beat down everything, and become a domestic wife, for Chester's sake? She faced the thought steadily, and then she shivered. She could

force herself to be a domestic wife, but not with Chester. With him now it would be appalling: it would be impossible.

A week passed, and another and another, without change, without advancing her, apparently, one step toward an answer of the question which confronted her. In herself there was change; she was subdued, strangely thoughtful and gentle, no longer occupied by the avid pursuit of excitement and pleasure, living passively, in an undertone, waiting for she knew not what. It seemed almost that she was living a life that was not her own. During this time she saw Keith only accidentally. He did not seek her, and when they met by chance he talked quietly on indifferent topics. She had asked for time, and, faithful to his undertaking, he gave it her. During that time there must obtain, in appearance at least, emotional quiescence. It was the only possible basis of intercourse while existing circumstances were maintained. He could embark upon no trifling dalliance with things vital to them; he could not fiddle while Rome was burning. He had never made casual love to anyone. He could give Aimée his life, but he could not give her his knee.

One of their fortuitous meetings occurred in the Brompton Oratory. Aimée went there almost daily at this period. The support of her religion, long

somewhat neglected, was sought in the straining crisis of her life; and it gave her, at least, temporary peace, while the consoling walls of its temples sheltered her. She had talked to her confessor about Keith. He was a kindly man, and he had taken, on the whole, a kindly view of her matrimonial predicament. He was not one of those who dismissed unauthorized love as a vicious ingredient in human affairs, not to be patiently reckoned with; but he had refused her absolution until she cast off her lover. She did not mind so much about that: the kindly talk had comforted her.

The day she met Keith she had been kneeling before one of the side altars. When she got up and saw him standing behind her, she was not surprised: she had been thinking of him, and it seemed very natural that he should be there. She would have been more surprised if the person, of whose form behind her she was conscious as she rose, had been anyone else.

For his part, Keith had not come in search of her. He had even forgotten—if he had ever known—that she was a member of the Roman Church. Nor had he come because he was himself a Catholic. In a rigorous sense of the word, he was not, perhaps, a Christian. If he had been a member of the council of Nicæa, he would have voted with Arius. But he could not understand how a man or a woman

who could accept the cardinal articles of the Christian faith could be anything but a Roman Catholic. The uninviting, ugly barrenness even of the exterior of a Nonconformist place of worship made him shiver. The English Church, to him, was cold, exclusive, even repellent: he had gone once, tired, to rest in Westminster Abbey and found it locked. He had learnt the personal requirements of the ordinary Catholic ritual, and followed it when he entered one of their churches. He accepted their hospitality, and it seemed to him it was at least incumbent upon him to conform to their observances. He would have felt it as little pardonable to cross the altar without genuflecting as to decline to rise when a man at whose house he was dining said a grace, whatever its form.

He had come to the Oratory for much the same reason as Aimée. He was passing through an exacting time, and it calmed him and lifted him to sit there for a while. The influence of it stole into his imagination. Everyone knows the atmosphere of a Roman Catholic cathedral; the dim repose, the sense of mystery, the laden air. And it was safe, it was inviolate; you would not be asked your business, you would not be disturbed, the doors would not be closed. The Universal Church spread her universal wings: Sceptic, Pagan, Calvinist, Mormon, you were welcome.

Admittedly a sensual religion, it appealed to Keith as it appealed to Aimée, because they were both deeply sensual—that is to say, they had a deep capacity of being affected through their senses. It was for this reason that, when they crossed to the deserted nave and seated themselves at the side of it, looking up at the jewelled, blazing altar, they did not, for a long time, speak. It was sufficient for them to sit together in this environment. They were drinking in the influence of the place and of each other. They were enjoying a pleasure which came to them through their sense of sight, through their sense of smell, and through their sense of feeling. Speech would have broken the spell.

It was broken eventually by some sightseers. Strolling casually round, they crossed the altar immediately below the steps. Stopping there, they turned with an air of mild interest and looked down the nave. It was not accident; they were quite conscious that they were standing with their backs to the altar, while they affected to take a comprehensive view of the church from that point. They did it in order to show their superiority to vulgar superstition.

"Fatuous boors," said Keith in an undertone, at last breaking the silence, "swallowing the same camel as the people they affect to despise, and stew-

ing in insufferable complacency because they think they have digested a different gnat!"

Aimée nodded slightly, but she did not speak. She was still looking up the church with an intent, almost dreamy gaze.

"To a devout Catholic," Keith continued, after a moment's pause, "the High Altar contains the Real Presence, and these unspeakable bounders turn their backs upon it. The religion of people of that type is very well epitomized in the way they sing tuny hymns, without thinking or caring what they mean. They dabble in and squabble, some of them, about surface trifles of ritual and form; but not one in a hundred has taken the trouble even to inquire into the foundations of the belief they profess. And not one in a thousand has adjusted the scales of his mind, without any lead under the side of orthodoxy, and reached an independent conclusion, after weighing the whole matter."

"Some people," said Aimée, "say they have no religion."

"If some people," Keith replied, "said they had no breath, they would make a remark equally sensible. The effrontery is colossal. The very mind which conceives that thought, and the very voice which utters it, are the chattels of the Power they are used to deny."

Aimée had come out of her reverie. She quietly

weighed this speech for a few moments. "Yes, of course, that is necessarily true," she said. "He couldn't have an idea of any kind if he depended on known forces. He uses his mind because something which he can't explain has given him the capacity to do so, just as a watch goes when we wind it up." She was leaning back, talking in a low voice. Keith had rested an arm on the back of his seat, and was looking at her. "If it ticked that it didn't believe in anything outside watches, it would be a bumptious little watch. But still, I suppose it would find itself no worse off, in the end, than the watches which ticked that man had made them, and that man was great. They would all go on the scrap-heap together."

"If you are arguing from that," said Keith—he accepted her in this mood quite simply—"if you are arguing from that, that mortals will cease with their breath, I think you are working the analogy for more than it will carry. Man is finite, and can only construct finite things."

"Yes," Aimée agreed. "When one thinks of it, the most wonderful of all created things is the human mind."

"To me there is something infinitely more wonderful than that," said Keith, "and that is the human individuality. It's so completely beyond comprehension, that I have a feeling that it will continue—

must continue. It's not the soul—that's another thing altogether—it's the essential ego, the something you can never share with anyone, and can never communicate to anyone. You can't describe it; it's part of the fact of it that it is indescribable. The origin of it is, of all things, the most mysterious; and it is just as impossible to conceive its cessation as to conceive its genesis."

"And yet we assume it as a very natural and ordinary possession," said Aimée. When *did* it begin?"

"When will it end? Is it possible for it to end? It's absurd to confuse it with the soul. I can conceive the end of my soul, but I can't conceive the end of my ego. The ego is necessarily the seat of self—it *is* self; the soul is the seat of the emotions which are the negation of self—pity, admiration, love (except sexual love—that's a different thing and ought to have a different name), tenderness, sensibility to beauty in nature and art. That is an exquisite adjunct of the ego, but were it killed—as it sometimes *is* killed—the ego itself would remain; just as we are forced to feel it must remain after the body is killed."

"I hope it will be so."

"You don't want to lose yourself."

"Oh no. I want——"

"Well?"

"Oh, never mind. In religion they think of what

they call the soul as a ghostly likeness of the body."

"That is because the earthly mind can conceive nothing that is not earthly, and it must have something definite upon which to project itself. They misuse terms. Outward religion is not a matter of the soul; it is a matter of the senses. It's an outlet for starved emotions. That is why you and I are here. The only completely non-sensual religion is the private faith which never expresses itself and never seeks to communicate itself; which almost ignores itself; which has no temples and no shrines and no words. The exaltation which vividly religious people feel, and which they think proceeds from the soul, is entirely the work of the senses. And the curious thing is that it reaches the extremest form among sects, such as the Welsh Nonconformists, which aspire to keep their churches most austere. To be revived is the very dickens of a debauch."

"Can't you understand it?" said Aimée. "Just to live is unendurable. If you had everything you needed, and no worries, but no distractions, I suppose you would commit suicide or go mad. We've got to keep boredom at bay somehow. Any emotion, any excitement, is better than mere existence. dead routine, mere passionless living on. That is the worst."

"Of course, that is the worst." He turned and

leaned his arms on the back of the seat in front of him.

The sightseers had gone, the church was quiet; once again they dropped into silence. For five or ten minutes they sat, side by side, without touching, looking, consummately conscious of one another.

"That is the worst," said Aimée again, almost under her breath, as if to herself; and once more there was a long space of silence.

At last she spoke rather hastily. "I have to go now." There was a little catch in her voice. "I am going."

"Yes," Keith answered slowly. He did not turn or move his arms from the seat in front.

"Howard"—she was speaking very low, and the word had a note of amazement, of appeal, of distraction—"I am going."

He turned then. "You need *never* go."

Their eyes met. For the first time, they looked deeply at one another. Then, with a little shuffle, she moved out of the file of seats and out of the church.

Chapter XXI

At this time Nell Legard was staying at Curzon Street. Hughes had suggested it a little tentatively, and Aimée, somewhat to his surprise, had readily acquiesced. Bertie was away on the Continent, so that his sister had been left in solitary occupancy of a country-house in the middle of the London season.

"It would be rather nice," Hughes had said, enunciating the last word with his usual clear precision.

"Of course it would," Aimée answered. "I had forgotten she was alone. I'll write to-day."

Consequently Aimée was thrown more closely than at any time in her life with the woman whom local rumour credited her with having supplanted. She got to know and to understand her, and it seemed to her rather curious that she had not noticed before how very much there was in her to admire and to like. She was so unaffected, so sweet-tempered, so evenly balanced, so extraordinarily unselfish; and altogether, though she

was not one who made an impression at the first glance, she was an innately graceful and charming woman. She had the faculty, too, of inspiring one with faith in her wisdom and judgment—so much so that Aimée was brought to wonder a good many times how she came to be Bertie's sister; or, more precisely, how Bertie came to be her brother.

And yet, when they were talking, she always dimly had that curious, cramping sense that, though she was a woman in years, she was not a woman in fact. The child was still paradoxically in her. It is a feeling almost inevitable in intercourse with a mature and cultured woman who has not married. She was not fully self-contained; she was still partially, anomalously, in embryo. Her outward circumstances had not kept pace with her mental and physical development. Aimée was always appreciating, and always with a little shock, a dead wall of discordant inexperience. It forced upon her the impression, which she felt she had no right to have, that, though she was younger, and no more intellectual and far less balanced, she was superior. In a sense, she was in another world; there was an odd gulf between them which no mere objective wisdom could cross.

On the afternoon that she returned from the Oratory, after her meeting with Keith, she found

Nell in the drawing-room. She put down the book she was reading as Aimée came in.

"You've just come at the best time," she said. "It makes me stop at an interesting place, and now I shall have something to look forward to."

"You look so cool and fresh always," said Aimée. "It's nice to find you here."

"It's a hot afternoon, isn't it, and you have been out and energetic, and I have been lazy."

"Oh, I don't know." Aimée dropped into a chair. "Sometimes I wish there wasn't a world at all, or anybody in it, or anything. Do you know that feeling?"

"We all know it," said Nell, "when we are worried, or when we are unhappy or ill."

"I'm not ill," said Aimée. "I think, if you could infect me with a nice big illness that would keep me in bed for months and months, I should be rather grateful to you."

Nell did not take her seriously. "Months and months, and big and nice. I can't think of any with the 'nice' in."

"Something not too painful or unpleasant," Aimée amplified, "but which would make people feel a little sorry for me, and prevent me being any good to anybody."

"What an extraordinary wish!" said Nell.

"You are thinking of your own kind of goodness," said Aimée, pulling off her gloves and stretching them between her hands, "but I wasn't quite."

Tea was brought in.

Aimée leaned back in her chair and put her gloves down. "Will you pour it out?" she asked, when the man had gone out. "I'm tired, and you always do things of that kind so much better than I do." She watched her guest with quiet candour through her big dark eyes. "You look your best behind a tea-tray in a large drawing-room full of people. You would make a lovely chatelaine of the real old school: you are not too violently modern. I wish I could move as quietly and sedately—just be naturally graceful and never try to attract."

"I don't think I should wish it, if I were you," said Nell, lifting up the teapot. "It's natural for you to want to attract and to be attractive. If you were to succeed in cutting it out, it would be like amputating an arm or some other necessary part of you."

"But what I mean is," said Aimée, "there is something in your blood that is not in mine. For instance, I am always rather afraid of my men-servants, or else they irritate me by their ridiculous correctness. But you have just the right attitude

with them: you can be considerate and human without running the least risk of being familiar."

Nell passed her a cup. "Well, that's not very difficult."

"I suppose it is because you were born to it," said Aimée, reflectively. "Of course I wasn't," she added simply.

"Oh, I think you were."

"No, I was quite poor before Chester married me. My father was well-connected, but he was in business; and it was while travelling in France for his firm that he met my mother. She was an actress—well, she danced beautifully—and I think, over there, they were rather surprised that he married her"—Aimée stirred her tea—"because they said he needn't have done so."

"And after that they came to England?"

"He did eventually: but I was sent to school in France, and I always like it best. England is a horrid place," she added, appropriately running the double "r"; and then, remembering her listener, softened the sentiment, "to live in—always."

"Do you mean the climate or the people?" asked Nell, with a smile.

"Oh, the atmosphere," said Aimée.

"That might apply to either."

"I mean the—the—the lack of elasticity, the feeling that you are in a young ladies' seminary. When

I come back from France, I always feel that I've ceased to be grown up and become a child again, and have to mind my p's and q's."

"We are not all like that," said Nell.

"No, some of you are sweet, but you've got such a silly majority."

Her somewhat chastened mood made a strong appeal to Nell. Never before had she opened her heart to her with this simple confidence; never had she confessed to her that she was conscious of any imperfections, that she suffered any concerns. She had always floated over the surface, a light bird of plumage, aloof from human cares and human bonds. When she had received her letter of invitation, she had hesitated some time before accepting. She questioned how far her presence in the house would be tolerable, if she was to be treated in the heedless, almost slighting, way which Aimée had been accustomed to adopt to her. The indication of some change of attitude given in the tone of the letter had decided her. It had some of the appearance of an olive-branch—though there had been no quarrel between them—and she was not the woman to decline it.

Ever since her arrival in the house, her sensibilities, acute to the cares of others, had told her that all was not well in it. The cloud had not lifted from Chester's face; and now she per-

ceived the shadow of it on Aimée's. She was keenly anxious to be of some help. It seemed to her that, between such a couple, a small issue might easily grow to disproportionate significance, through failure to appreciate one another's points of view; but her efforts to learn something of the cause of the trouble from Hughes had been fruitless, and hitherto Aimée had been unapproachable.

This afternoon, however, there appeared to be quite a good hope of gaining her confidence. So, when the tea-tray had been removed, she led the conversation in that direction.

"Is Chester at the House?" she asked.

"Oh, yes; he's always at the House."

"I never can understand, can you," said Nell, "why it is necessary for a country to be *always* legislating, *always* making new laws? Surely we have enough. Why can't they be content? What libraries of books it must need to hold them all! and they never stop making more. I wonder they can think of anything new to make them about. I'm sure Chester works too hard. He looks very worn and worried sometimes."

Again the same thing! It was always coming to her now. Aimée did not show any change in her face, but she felt the same stab as when Bruton had spoken about Chester; only, from each new

hand the point came a little sharper, and it went a little deeper.

"He is rather bothered," she said; "but I don't think it has anything to do with the House: he likes that."

"He ought not to be bothered," said Nell diplomatically. "He has everything to make him happy."

"What would you call everything?"

"Well, all the groundwork," smiled Nell, "that most people would think adequate to build happiness upon—a good home, good health, a good income, and you."

"Supposing," said Aimée, cautiously, "you were to think for a long time, could you think of anything he has *not* got which might make him happier?"

Nell tried hard. She saw that she was in a fair way towards the achievement of her object, and she wanted to give Aimée every assistance along the road she appeared to have taken. But here was one of the many directions where the immaturity of her personal circumstances cramped her outlook. The deficiency which would have come instantly to the mind of a married woman did not occur to her.

"Well, really, I can't," she confessed at last. "He has so much. We all of us want something.

Perhaps, if I were in his position, I should wish for a seat in the Cabinet, or for a private chapel in my own house; but the lack of those things wouldn't make me unhappy."

Aimée suddenly thought she would tell her. She so wanted to talk to someone, and Nell was so patently to be trusted. She moved to a chair close to her.

"It's secrets," she said.

"Yes."

"The trouble is just this"—she put her two hands on Nell's chair—"Chester would like to have a large family, and—and—*I wouldn't,*" she finished sharply, with a plunge of determination.

Even yet Nell scarcely understood. Again there was the something lacking. "Can't you compromise and have a small one?"

"I had a little girl," said Aimée, rather pathetically. "She died. Don't you remember?"

"Of course I do. Well"—Nell was puzzled; she had scarcely looked upon this as a matter within human volition—"why should you be anxious? You are still quite young."

Aimée leaned back in her seat. "Oh, Nell, I simply can't talk to you, you know."

"Oh, but, please, you must." Nell bent forward earnestly, fearful of losing what she seemed to be on the point of gaining. "I won't be stupid. Do

you mean that you refuse to do something that Chester wishes?"

Aimée nodded.

"Why won't you do it? I think you ought. I'm sure he would never be unkind or horrid to you."

"Oh no!"

"Then why won't you?"

Aimée turned to her suddenly. "If you were married, would you like to have lots and lots of children? To go on having them perpetually all your life?"

"I've never thought very much about it," said Nell. "I've always supposed that, if I married, it might be so."

"Of course, you are of the 'sent from Heaven' school," said Aimée, with a touch of pungency.

"I don't quite know what you mean," said Nell, perplexed and slightly shocked. "Children are the gifts of Heaven."

Aimée was feeling a little impatient with her. "The rain is the gift of Heaven," she said, "but when you go out, it's possible to put up an umbrella."

Nell looked at her with a mystified and troubled face. It was difficult for her to understand that a subject which Aimée treated—or appeared to treat—with airy jocularity was big enough to get be-

tween husband and wife, and to threaten to destroy the peace of them both.

"Is that all?" she said.

"All what?" asked Aimée.

"All there is between you?"

"Don't you think it's enough?" The tone had almost a laugh in it. "Chester has strong parental instincts, and nothing to satisfy them; he has a great deal of property, and no one to leave it to; and now it seems likely that he never will. In some countries it is sufficient ground for divorce."

"Why do you say *now* he never will?" asked Nell.

Aimée was momentarily disconcerted. The word had slipped out. "Well, before he married me," she answered, after only a few seconds' hesitation, "there was always a chance that he would find a wife who would supply him with all he needed."

Nell looked at her thoughtfully for some time without speaking. Aimée lighted a cigarette.

"I don't believe you meant that, Aimée," said Nell at last. "I don't believe that, realizing as you do, what it means to Chester, you would stand between him and so much for a mere personal whim."

"You don't know me," said Aimée airily, blowing a whiff of smoke.

"Yes, I do. You deceived me until recently—

well, until I came this time—but now I know there is far more depth of feeling in you than you want people to think." She hesitated. Then she said suddenly, "Is there somebody else?"

Aimée, caught unprepared, for a moment did not answer.

The slight delay was enough for Nell. "Aimée!" The word came from her with deep reproach. There was a short, tense silence, and then she added: "After all his thought for you! All you owe to him!"

"Oh, I know. You needn't tell me that!" cried Aimée, with a stinging rush of tears and anger. "And I haven't said there is anyone else. You are not to assume things."

"I can see there is." Nell's sympathies were so strongly enlisted on the side of Chester that she hardly judged Aimée fairly—at least, not yet. Her voice was almost hard. "A few moments ago you said yourself that you were poor until you married him. Now you are surrounded by luxuries. Nothing has been too good for you—nothing that love and thought and money could provide. And nothing has been exacted in return. Absolute trust has been placed in you. Your comings and goings have never been questioned. You have had all the liberty and indulgence that any woman would wish.

And yet—in spite of all—you couldn't even remain firm in your allegiance."

A few months before Aimée would probably have received such a speech as this with such contemptuous resentment as could only have been met by apology or departure. Even now she seethed with indignant anger; but she controlled it.

"I don't think you ought to speak to me like that," she said.

Nell hesitated for a long time. "Well, I'm sorry;" she said, but with reluctance.

"You are blaming me," said Aimée, "for not valuing Chester's goodness, which is not true. What you *should* blame me for—if you blame me at all—is for marrying him. We may appreciate material things, we may be grateful for them, we may even marry for them, but we can't love them to the exclusion of a human being. Our only chance, really, is that the human rival shall never appear."

"Well, but, Aimée—I don't want to seem harsh—you have accepted all this, and I think you ought to have felt that the acceptance demanded of you ordinary loyalty."

"Ordinary loyalty!" Aimée broke out with sudden emotion. "You speak of it glibly, as if it were a matter of personal will. Do you suppose that luxuries that wealth, that even goodness and care

and thought, can ever be a guard for an empty heart and for a starved soul? If a bowl is not brimming, it will catch the rain-drops, whether it is earthenware or porcelain or gold."

"I don't know how you can speak of an empty heart," said Nell indignantly, "when you have a husband who is so unselfish and devoted. But anyway, you have shown, by your choice, that you value the gold and goodness more than the rain-drops, and, to use your own metaphor, you should have put up an umbrella."

"How little you know! Well, I'll tell you." Aimée, who had risen, sat down again. "To compare money with love is like comparing a few flat straws with whole fields of growing grain. You have surprised a secret, so I won't deny it, but I trust you. I would throw aside, without a thought, all this"—she glanced round the room—"wealth, that you think I value so highly, and live in a cottage. *That* would be nothing. Even the stigma of a spurious name would be nothing."

"Then why do you hesitate?" The quiet sarcasm was quite undisguised.

"Because of Chester."

Through a silence of several minutes, the three words remained in the ears of both women. In Nell's they seemed to become clearer and more insistent as the seconds passed. She was advanc-

ing a further, and a considerable, step in her comprehension of Aimée. She saw that, beneath her light manner, she was suffering—that she was suffering, perhaps, even more than Chester. She realized that there is a consistency in the formation of character; that, just as her capacity for pleasure was greater, so her capacity for pain might be greater than his. And, with it, was a fierce, instinctive shrinking against the fact of this latter capacity being suspected by others. Nell perceived, or thought she perceived, latent traits of heroism in her, which it was possible had never yet been fully tested, and which, therefore, she had not appreciated herself. She felt almost sure she would never do anyone a grievous harm.

At last, with a little effort—which came from diffidence and not from will—she put out a hand to her. "I spoke very unkindly just now," she said. "Will you forgive me?"

Aimée snatched at the hand rather hastily, and sprang up with a short, forced laugh.

"Oh, rubbish!" she said. "I never take things of that kind seriously. We've been talking a lot of nonsense." She stretched herself. "Life is a silly bore, isn't it?"

A few minutes later Hughes himself came in.

"Isn't it time we all dressed?" he said, curling his hands in front of him. "We are dining early,

are we, Kitty? There are some tickets for to-night, I *think*." He took a theatre envelope from the mantelpiece, and partly withdrew the slips of pasteboard it contained. "Yes—the Haymarket. It begins at eight-thirty.' '

"Oh, Chester," said Aimée quickly, "do you mind very much? I've such a headache. Will you just take Nell?"

"My dear, what a pity!" He looked at her with concern. "I'm told the play is very *in*-teresting."

She smiled, a little plaintively. "Yes, but I'm afraid nothing will interest me to-night so much as my own little bed."

To Nell she said, when Chester was out of earshot: "Be very nice to him, Nell."

Chapter XXII

"CHESTER, supposing we were divorced or something?" said Aimée, the next day.

"My dear!" reprehended Hughes, very much horrified.

"Well, I don't like to say I died; I don't like to think of that. So I say, supposing we were divorced or something, I think it would be very nice if you married Nell."

"There is no such thing as divorce," said Hughes.

"But people are continually getting divorced."

Aimée was talking in a semi-bantering tone, but Hughes was very serious, almost severe. It was a subject upon which he felt strongly.

"That is a human imposition for which there is no au-thor-ity whatever," he said. "Man and wife are man and wife until they are parted by death."

"Well, supposing I died," said Aimée, without appearing to be concerned by the distinction, "would you marry Nell?"

The severity left his face, and he chided her with a gentle smile. "You must not talk about such foolish things," he said.

"I don't think it's any more foolish than making a will. I feel quite well, and so do you, but you've made your will, haven't you?"

"Yes, yes."

"Then will you promise to marry Nell, if I die?"

"You forget," he said, still smiling, "that you are trying to extract a promise which it might not lie in my power to redeem."

"Will you promise to ask her?"

"The answer to that question is in the negative."

"That's better than 'No, sir!' It means, at least, I'm an honourable friend and not an honourable member. Will you promise to think about it?"

She was treating him in the baby vein which always fascinated him. They were standing in his study.

He looked at her with tender amusement. "To think about it now," he asked, "or in my—um, um—be-reave-ment?"

"You had better begin now, and then it will be more simple to go on if the necessity arises. Think about it a little every month or two— when a dull Radical, who makes you want an antidote, is up, for instance. That is, return to thinking about it; because of course you used to do so before you met me, didn't you?"

"No, no; we will have no secrets."

"It doesn't matter; I know you did. Don't you think she's awfully nice?"

"She's a charming girl," he admitted, "and very sensible."

"She's not exactly a girl, Chester," said Aimée, bridling a little.

"No, I suppose not," he said reflectively. "Time passes very quickly. But I've known her all her life, and I don't see her change."

"You don't want a girl: you're too old. How old are you, Chester?"

"I signed the marriage-register," he prevaricated, "—when was it? nearly three years ago—and you were certainly present."

"Well, never mind. It's a painful subject, silly old thing! You are going to think about it?"

"You are very persistent, Kitty." He looked at her, for the first time, a little cautiously.

"Well, I like Nell. And I want to provide for you, don't you see? I want to make my will."

"You leave me Nell?" Again he smiled.

"Yes."

"Very well."

He went out of the room, and Aimée sat for a while and thought. She had been talking apparently lightly, but her questions had been put with very serious intent, and the answers had left her with little comfort. He could contemplate re-marriage if

she died, but he could not contemplate—he could not see—divorce. Marriage, to him, took place in the church, not in the vestry. As a Catholic, though she was not a strict one, she found no difficulty in understanding his attitude. Such a man would consider himself married to a woman the moment the priest had pronounced them man and wife, even though the register were never signed. Her active imagination saw queer possibilities in that, which could be put to use by a writer of drama.

She came back presently to the dead reality of her own outlook. She was Chester's wife, and she could never be other than Chester's wife while he and she lived. Her story was more stringent than any of those she had imagined; it sprang from no curious chance; there was no glamour about it; it was the result of the inexorable working out of a very ordinary set of circumstances. The choice before her was narrowing, sharpening. There was no question now that she could ever give him children. There was no question that they could ever be divorced. It was just whether she would live with him on the crust of appearances, or whether she would break it. Whether she would beat down every claim of her heart and soul and sex for ever, or whether, unable to give him the substance, she should withdraw the shadow also.

Every day now was a long struggle, a torture

of indecision, a wearing fight to keep her precarious balance, strained and wrung by contending claims. She knew that Howard was waiting; she knew that Chester was unhappy. There were days when she swayed this way, and days when she swayed that; whole evenings when she was on the point of throwing herself upon her husband's clemency, of begging him to take her, a chastened comrade and a ward, to some country where she could not be traced, away from everyone and everything; whole mornings when her hand hovered over the bell, ready to pack her things and call a cab to drive her to Keith's studio. And everything on the surface was curiously calm and regular. With so much fierce unrest in her heart, with such an issue tottering to decision, the routine life about her proceeded as usual. An observer less sensitive than Nell Legard would not have perceived that anything was amiss. Keith made no sign; Chester went to the House and returned, talked to her with careful enunciation, during their stately dinners, of current events, and was evenly considerate and kind, occasionally joking with her lightly, occasionally kissing her, occasionally complimenting her. He felt vaguely that they were drifting further apart, but he had no shade of suspicion how critical was the position. The ordinary flow of visits and visitors, and of the entertainments of the season, ran its course; she

dressed as carefully as ever, made herself look as attractive as ever, kept up her tricks and charms and changes of manner, and her fleeting poses—continued, on the surface, to be an angel, a stoic, and a baby.

In the midst of this—this seething, churning turmoil of distracting doubt beneath a level sea—she received a visit from Mrs. Keith. When she heard her name, she felt for a few moments that she could not see her. Here was a woman who had never shown her anything but kindness and good-will, whom she had already harmed, and whom she had it in her mind to harm irreparably. How could she speak to her, how could she look at her, even if she knew nothing? Then, with a strong glow of the vigorous self-respect that lay at the bottom of her character, she flung aside the impulse to deny herself. She was not going to play the poltroon. She told the servant—she was in her own room when the message was brought to her—that she would come down to the drawing-room, and then proceeded quietly to finish her toilet with especial care. A few minutes later she descended the stairs.

Mrs. Keith was sitting forward in a large chair, her hands clasped in front of her. Aimée saw at once that she was agitated. The perception produced a feeling of relief. Her worst fear had been that she would be called upon to act the hypocrite.

As soon as she closed the door, Mrs. Keith rose. "Mrs. Hughes," she said, without any preface, speaking with difficulty, without the least anger, but with poignant reproach, "why have you done this? Why have you behaved like this to me?"

"Please, what do you mean?" said Aimée, sitting down quietly, and waiting for her visitor to do the same.

"Perhaps it is foolish of me to come here," said Mrs. Keith, reoccupying the seat from which she had risen. "I don't know. I am very wretched. I don't want to make a scene—that can do no good—but I thought that, at least, I could appeal to you, that I could explain to you. I don't think you are deliberately callous. You may have thought, from my manner and from our life, that I don't love Howard." She looked straight at Aimée with eyes that had tears in them. "We are not demonstrative, but I do love him—very much."

"But you have not told me," persisted Aimée.

"I have just come from his studio. He has not been home for weeks, even on Sundays. I have been getting more and more worried and anxious. His letters told me nothing, so I came up to see him. There were less signs of work in his studio than I have ever seen there before, but he could give me no other reason for stopping away from home. At last—quite by chance—I mentioned you."

"Yes?" said Aimée. She looked for a moment at her visitor, and the word came firmly, but in a low voice.

"He did not answer. He looked as you are looking now." She was straining the chain of a small wrist-bag she held in her hands. "I don't know how much is true, but I know something is true."

"Something is," said Aimée, quite simply. "It was not his fault: it was all mine. He did not want me; he ignored me, snubbed me. But I was very pertinacious; I would not be shaken off, and at last I made him notice me."

"How could he help it, if you meant him to?" Mrs. Keith was following the train of her thoughts, looking at Aimée with a grieved, strained face, and she paid her the compliment perfectly frankly. "When you came in just now, I thought how useless it would be for an ordinary, unattractive person to contend with you, if you had made up your mind to wreck my home and your own. I can't think why you have behaved in this way. It can't have been for the pleasure of giving pain. If you had been a mere shallow and heartless woman, you would never have appealed to Howard."

"I hate to be passed over." Aimée was playing with the trinkets on a small table beside her, following the course of her fingers with her eyes. "I

suppose I have had too much silly flattery; I suppose I have become vain."

"Well, now you have gained your end, now you have proved your power, what more do you want? Aren't you satisfied?"

Aimée did not answer.

"Aren't you satisfied?" Mrs. Keith repeated. The little bag was getting contorted in her hands. "You can find lovers wherever you choose. The whole world is possible to you. I have only my husband. Why do you want to steal my ewe lamb?"

"Everybody is somebody's ewe lamb," said Aimée, a little mournfully.

"You don't know what you are doing—you can't know," cried Mrs. Keith, with a burst of emotion. "Twelve years"—she paused to control her voice—"twelve years we have lived our life together. You know him only as a distinguished man, but I can remember the weeks of suspense that used to elapse after his pictures were sent in before we knew whether they would even be hung. Morning after morning I have watched, in torturing silence, while he opened his letters. In those twelve years I have shared in his struggles, in his disappointments, in his ambitions, in his failure, and in his success. I've rejoiced with him and grieved with him. Through all that time he has never had any depression, any anxiety, any exultation which has not equally been

mine. To me he has never become the great man that others see. I know him in all his phases, his follies and limitations as well as his virtues. He is simply a husband whom I love. And do you never think of my three little girls? They keep asking me why I always have to carve now, even on Sundays. Don't you *mind* if their lives are blighted? I can't tell them, and the servants are listening. Don't you even consider what it would mean to them if you take their father away?"

"Oh, *yes!*" cried Aimée, almost in anguish. She had tried several times to stop her, but Mrs. Keith had gone inexorably on. "Oh yes, yes, yes!"

"Then, if you feel that, how can you persist in what you are doing?"

"You may kill me if you like," said Aimée quietly—"if it would be any comfort to you—but I can't give him up."

"You can't?" repeated Mrs. Keith slowly. The full reality, the grim rigour of what had happened, of what was likely to happen, began to come home to her. "Then you love him?"

"Love him!" Aimée's hand made a circular sweep. "You see this—this room, this house, and all the rest that goes with it? My husband is very rich. I would fling it away; I would tear the very clothes off my back and leave them behind, and follow him—*him*—wherever he chose to go."

Mrs. Keith could not speak. The passion in Aimée, the irrevocable fact of it, the mad flood and fierceness of it, and all that it might portend for them both, left her staring in front of her, dumb.

"*You* can't love like that," cried Aimée, rising suddenly to superb scorn. "You think you know him, but you have only walked on the surface of him. You have barely turned a sod, far less struck down to the gold. You—*you* could not find it. Your simple husbandry could not hold him for ever. It was only sufficient until the miner came."

Mrs. Keith turned her head and looked at her. Her face was pale and expressionless. She had been struck a thudding blow, and she was still dizzy beneath the force of it.

She spoke in a cold, mechanical voice. "Do you see Howard daily?"

"I haven't seen him for weeks."

"He is not doing any work. You are chafing. I am suspended in an impossible position. It cannot go on.

There was no answer.

"It cannot go on," repeated Mrs. Keith, in a little louder voice. "There must be an end—of some sort."

Suddenly Aimée roused herself. "Yes, you are right," she said steadily. "It cannot go on. It is

impossible. It *must* end. It *shall* end. I will *make* it end."

But as yet she did not know how she would make it end. Even when she had fallen on the sofa, after Mrs. Keith had gone, her arms beneath the cushions, her face buried in them, she did not know.

Chapter XXIII

SHE crushed the cushions into her eyes to hide Mrs. Keith's face, but she could not hide it. She remembered how sympathetic and happy she had been on the day she went to see her first, what a broad and sensible and smiling view she had taken of her difficulties with Chester, how brightly and tranquilly she had assumed the necessary security of her own quiet household. Then, in front of that picture, swept the face she had seen last, expressionless as a mask; and the kindly, jesting voice was strangled by the discord of a dull, level monotone. And, yet again, she saw the same face, younger and more emotional, watching, with drawn breath and still lips, Howard opening his letters.

She was still lying on the sofa when Hughes came in, having returned from the House a little earlier than was his wont.

"Why, are you tired, Kit-ty?" he asked, with slight surprise.

She sat up rather sharply and a little defiantly.

"My *dear,* you are crying!" he exclaimed, in a deeply solicitous tone.

"R-rot!" said Aimée brazenly, her eyes glistening.

As she was obviously prepared to deny a conspicuous fact, he did not contradict her, but he continued to be concerned.

"You need a change, perhaps?" he reflected. "London is not very nice just now; the House is late in rising. If you would care to make a move ahead of me, it would be easy to arrange."

"London will do for the present," said Aimée lightly. "Will you pass my cigarettes?"

He searched carefully for her case on various tables without success, and then Aimée suddenly got up.

"Never mind," she said; "it's too late!" and went off to dress, humming a tune.

After dinner Hughes came into the drawing-room before returning to the House, and lingered somewhat uneasily. It was patent that there was a matter on his mind which he felt some diffidence in approaching.

"I heard of a rather distressing case to-day," he said at last, sitting down after moving restlessly about the room for several minutes.

"Yes?" asked Aimée, quite quietly and expectantly.

"Young Captain Cousins," proceeded Hughes, encouraged by her attitude, "who was married only eighteen months ago, and has lately been stationed in West Africa, died out there last month from malaria. On hearing of his illness, his young wife, who appears to have been very much attached to him, could not be dissuaded from going out to him, and I learnt to-day that she has paid for her devotion with her own life. She contracted the fever within a week or two of her arrival, and has succumbed to it."

"How splendid of her!" said Aimée, who had known the couple very slightly, and could only feel general sympathy. "It was every bit as brave as going into battle."

She wondered vaguely why Hughes should have beaten about the bush before telling her this.

"It is particularly sad," he went on, "since I understand there is a child—a boy four months old—who, through the untimely death of his parents, is left inadequately provided for."

"What *are* you going to say?" asked Aimée, her eyes wide and intent. With a sickening droop, she had guessed the drift of his remarks.

Hughes hesitated. Then he said, with a slight effort, but without varying his even, punctilious tone: "It has occurred to me that, as we have

large houses with unoccupied rooms, we might—um—m—adopt the child."

"Oh, Chester!"

He mistook the significance of the exclamation. "He need be no trouble to you," he proceeded quickly. "He would have his nurses and his nurseries. I have been thinking that at Brackett the two east rooms on the second floor, overlooking the small paddock, would be very suitable. He could be left at Brackett during the season, so that there should be no risk of your engagements and occupations being interfered with by infectious children's ailments and so on, and orders should be given that questions regarding his health and upbringing should be brought direct to me. It would not be indispensable for you even to see him, unless you wished; but, as he grew older and before he went to school, of course it would be beneficial to him if you found him a nice little fel-low——"

"Oh, stop, *stop,* Chester!" Aimée almost shrieked. "I can't bear any more, and I won't."

"Why, Kitty!" Hughes was very much astonished. He was quite unprepared for this outburst. He had expected arguments, objections, perhaps finally a grudged consent.

"Don't you see," she cried, "that you are striking me just as hard and just as cruelly as if you had

clenched your fist and were battering me with it? Don't you see that every word you speak is a blow, and a blow, and a blow,-as fast as you can rain them?"

"It is very difficult——" began Hughes, trying to understand.

"If ours was one of those cases where children had been denied, you should adopt this baby, and I would mother it. I wouldn't mind the trouble or the tie. It should give me measles and whooping-cough and mumps, and everything that any child ever thought of having, and I wouldn't care. I would play hide-and-seek with it, and tell it tales at bedtime, and give it nice things to eat that you said it wasn't to have. But ours isn't one of those cases, and you shan't adopt a child—you *shan't!*"

Hughes could not follow her; he could only see that her opposition was deep and passionate, and that it would be folly to force his purpose in the face of resentful hostility in a quarter where it could make itself disastrously felt. It seemed to him that he was somehow very near attaining the utmost that he desired, but that he must abandon even this makeshift upon which he had begun to set store.

Presently Aimée went on speaking. She was calm again—rather strangely calm. Sitting with

an elbow on each arm of her chair, her chin was bent on her closed hands, and she was looking at him over them.

"I don't think I have ever realized till now," she said, "how much it meant to you—how very much—ever really, quite."

Chester lifted his head and looked round. His breath was drawn; his voice fell almost beneath it. "Kitty?"

"You shall have children of your own," she said. "You shall see them about you and make men and women of them. Only trust me"—she dropped her head till her brow was resting on the closed white hands, sparkling with rings—"trust me just a little while."

That night Aimée did not sleep. She saw, alternately, Mrs. Keith going out from her, stricken, and Chester coming in to show her, with suppressed eagerness, the poor substitute he had found for the heart's desire from which she had excluded him. He had been born with an expectation which he valued above all his possessions, and she had filched it from him by marrying him—by marrying him without the will, and finally without the power, to bring it to fulfilment. In coming between him and the realization of those wishes, she had deprived him of what was inherently his.

She tossed over to the other side, and again she

saw Mrs. Keith. Her default against her was one which no present self-sacrifice could make good. She had not drawn from her husband a passing expression of passion, or even engaged him in an intermittent, superficial liaison; she had taken him altogether. She herself had become his wife in such a complete sense that, while she lived, whether they met or whether they parted, she knew that he could never resume his old relations, could never be to his legal wife what he had been before. And this was a woman who had injured neither her nor, probably, anyone in the world, who had given her never an unkind word or an unkind thought.

The last of the shadows on her pillow was Keith himself. When she met him he was absorbed in his art and his ambition, steadily developing his powers, rising gradually and coherently to a position of distinction, perhaps destined to leave an indelible mark upon the record of achievement. He had shown her quite unmistakably that he did not need her, but she had persisted, for her own gratification, till she [illegible]ng him out of his setting. Now—his wife had [illegible]id—he was doing no work. That was the first fruit of her influence. She had taken his occupation, and what had she to give him in return? Her pretty form and a scandal, her comradeship and her worldly needs, her distract-

ing passion and her love. What could come of their permanent association? A heyday of paradise and drab years of struggle. She would divide his enthusiasm and double his burden. He would have to paint, to paint quickly, and to paint for sale. Small oils to hang in libraries would come in hasty sequence from the brush that had painted "The Light of Day." The cloud of his treatment of his wife would remain over him. His ambitions and devotions, the name he had already made and the honour that might still be in store, his ties of blood and of name and of friendship, his whole future, were poured into her lap. She had taken too much from him.

She turned again and again on her pillow, and at last, towards dawn, she dozed fitfully. She resented the light; it seemed to come so quickly. But she got up at her usual time and met Chester at breakfast. The indication she had given the night before of a weakening of her resolve had lightened his spirits. He had slept well, and was neat and fresh and cheerful, inclined even to be a little facetious. But he noticed that Aimée appeared tired.

"You are looking a little *pale,* Kitty, my dear," he said solicitously.

"Oh, never mind. One can't always be at one's best at breakfast. The English breakfast is really

a terrible ordeal, which could only be conceived in a country where no one has any æsthetic sensibility. A man who can make jokes when he is eating bacon and eggs in the cold dawn is an abnormal insular product who outrages one's sense of symmetry."

"But I have made no jokes," repudiated Hughes, in a tone of slight alarm.

"No, but you would, I believe, if you could think of any, Chester."

When he picked up his letters after breakfast and retired to his library, she went with him.

"Chester, I was quite in earnest yesterday," she said. He was seated at his desk, and she in a big easy-chair, partly with her back to him. "But, first, I want to go away."

"I'm sure you ought—I said so yesterday," replied Hughes. "London is becoming op-*press*-ive. But I can't join you for a week or two."

"I don't want you to join me," said Aimée. "I don't want you to join me at all. That is the point. You see, it's rather a big change that I'm going in for, isn't it? And I want to—sort of—get used to it, to get through to the end of my old self. You don't fit in with my old self, do you Chester, so you wouldn't help—you would be in the way."

"Possibly so," said Hughes, frankly admitting

her point. "In the past, I fear, we have not got on in every respect so well as we might. There have been some differences of outlook and of temp-er-a-ment. In the future, my dear, I feel sure we shall become much better comrades. Are you thinking of going to Brackett?"

"Oh, my dear Chester, of *course* not. Don't you understand? I want to get *away* from all that for a while—to spin and spin, to cram all the power of spinning of the rest of my life into a few weeks, till I can spin no more and just drop."

"Those are rather violent methods, surely," said Hughes, with a slight, dubious smile.

"Well, when you have a young horse that is unmanageable, you let it have its way till it is exhausted. I have a lot to get out of myself. You must give me plenty of money. I want to go to France, to Switzerland, to the mountains and lakes—everywhere where the sun is. I have to make the most of this time. You see, I'm thinking that I may never have another. I'm starting my journeys into a country from which people don't always return."

"Ah, my dear, you mustn't feel that," said Hughes, with quick concern. "With proper care and good physicians, the danger is very slight."

"Is it, Chester?" said Aimée, quite docilely, gaz-

ing at the pile of ferns and flowers in the hearth. "Well, anyway, I want a change, don't I?"

"It is a curious whim," he said, turning half round and looking at her profile.

"I'm going to try not to have any more whims," she answered.

"You could not possibly go alone."

"Oh, no, I should take a maid, of course. And I have friends all over France." She pressed her cheek to the cushion of her chair in her old babyish manner. "I shouldn't be lonely."

He turned back to his desk. "Well, come, then, we will plan out a little tour together. Where is the Baedeker? Then I will write to the hotels and arrange for you to be comfortable."

"Why, I might as well go to Brackett, if you do that," said Aimée, laughing. "I should be walking through the Continent between two walls of routine and preparation, which would go on and on, without ever widening or getting any higher or lower, till they brought me back to England. It would be as bad as being a crowned head."

"But, my dear, you couldn't go haphazard. You might find the hotels full, you might be very inconvenienced."

"Well, I'll telegraph in advance. All the joy would be gone if I couldn't flit and change, and move or stay, just as I felt inclined. Do you think

I don't know my France and Switzerland? How long did I live there before I met you, silly Chester?"

"I should feel happier to think you were not out of the country. Some of the English Spas are becoming very fashionable. Harrogate, perhaps? Or somewhere at the seaside would be nice."

"Cromer, do you think, or Brighton? There's always something going on at the end of the piers. Chester, I just *won't.*"

"Well, well." He put away the Baedeker, which he had taken from a shelf. "I hope you will not find you have undertaken more than you can manage. If you fall into any difficulty, come home, and leave me to arrange it, and if you are taken ill, telegraph at once. When do you want to go, and how long will you be away?"

"Oh, Chester!" Suddenly she got up and kissed him. "Oh, Chester——"

"Kitty, my dear!" He took her hand.

"What day is it to-day?" She dropped her chin till it rested on his head. "July the twentieth. By the end of August"—she spoke slowly—"by the end of August I won't stand in the way of what you want any more."

Chapter XXIV

In Paris Aimée dismissed her maid. She sent her home with a month's wages and a good character, and engaged a French one, whom she chose for other qualifications besides proficiency in hair-dressing. Then she sent a long telegram to Keith:

"I am in Paris and I want you. Do not burn your boats. If you burn your boats, you will never see me again. You want some foreign backgrounds and effects. Aimée."

The following afternoon, about the time of the arrival of the boat-train, she sat in the sumptuous portico of the Continental, overlooking the great courtyard of the hotel. The fountain tinkling in its centre, and the cool colonnades surrounding it on three sides, only emphasized the white heat that beat down upon it. Cab after cab, in almost ceaseless procession, rolled in under the archway and discharged its occupants. Parties of Americans,

with their heavy baggage, were packed into buses and despatched on their way; solitary men, coming down late and in a hurry, were sent off in a second with a single portmanteau—all with perfect regularity and smoothness, under the quiet direction of the massive and stately concierge, ordering his army of underlings with the unflurried dignity of a marshal in the field.

Aimée did not get anxious or impatient as each successive cab brought only strangers. She continued to wait and watch quietly. She knew that Keith would come; and, now that the meeting was assured and imminent, there was even a strange sort of paradoxical relief when the sight of an unknown face, as a vehicle emerged from the archway, postponed it yet for a few moments. The cabs came into her field of vision in segments: first the horse, then the driver, then the occupant. The watching produced a queer rippling surface excitement above the deeper one. It became a sort of game. How long could it hold out, this stream of cabs, without breaking her suspense? Another rumble and clatter sounded beneath the archway; another horse came, another driver. A second more, and the game was over. The third segment did not bring the curious relief, but a shock of joy—a shock of joy produced by the wholly expected.

The cab drew up, as they all had done, at the side of the courtyard nearest the bureau. Keith got out and paid his fare; his traps were immediately in the hands of two porters; and the coachman restarted his horse, drove round the fountain, and rattled out under the archway. It had happened all in a moment almost. The courtyard was again calm and expectant. But Howard was in the hotel: he had gone to the bureau to engage his room.

Presently he came walking round the colonnades, looking about him. He was on the point of passing behind Aimée, who was seated near a pillar.

"Howard," she said, but not loud; and she only partly turned in her chair.

He stopped, for a few seconds stood looking at her (she had again turned her back), and then quite simply, and without speaking, came and sat beside her.

Words would have been banal. The moment was too full, too pregnant, too poignantly felt. The passionate will to live utterly, growing and accumulating in them both since their birth, had culminated in it. Their faculties were absorbed in a realization. They were together, and away, and alone.

During these few minutes of silence, Aimée, leaning her elbow on the arm of her chair and her

cheek in her hand, continued to look out at the courtyard with curious tranquility. The cabs still came and went, the stately concierge still walked leisurely up and down the steps, still opened and closed the doors of the more important-looking vehicles, still raised his hand slowly to the peak of his cap in a preoccupied way, as a piled-up omnibus rolled out of the courtyard, leaving him with his five-franc piece. It seemed to her rather odd and futile that it should keep going on—this movement of arrival and departure. The feeling in her own soul was that there could never be any more arrivals and any more departures in the world. She seemed to have reached the completion of everything.

At last she dropped her hand and sat up.

"You haven't burnt your boats?" she said.

"That was a stipulation I couldn't understand," said Keith, who was also watching the movement in the courtyard.

"Answer me, Howard. Have you burnt your boats?"

"No."

"Have you noticed the concierge?" she said. "Isn't he fat? Isn't he splendid?"

"He's not fat exactly," said Howard, looking at him; "he's substantial. I call him rather a fine man."

"What strikes me about him," said Aimée, "is

that he is so absolutely right as the concierge of this hotel. It's the only place in the world for him, and he is the only man in the world for it. The head-waiter is the same. You'll see him presently. You couldn't conceive a different kind of head-waiter at the Continental. He does nothing but cut a big melon at breakfast. You pay two francs a slice for it because he cuts it. It's quite worth it. It would be terrible to see him working at a lower fee."

There was another pause. Second after second the silence lasted. Then Keith turned and looked at her.

"What *are* we talking about?" he said.

Slowly Aimée, too, turned her head.

"Howard! . . . Oh!" Their hands met between the chairs.

"Is it really, really *this?*" he said.

"To-morrow we will go to the Luxembourg," she said, "and afterwards we will go to the mountains and the lakes, and stay amongst them."

"But why do you keep talking about not burning boats?"

"You mustn't ask me questions. If you do, it will all burst, like a beautiful glass globe that has taken months to blow."

"I seem only to have part of you," he said, looking at her keenly. "I want the whole."

"Greedy man, you have got the whole."

"But you are keeping something back."

"You have got the whole," she repeated—her hand was still in his, and he felt its warm pressure —"for ever, from now."

He was still slightly dubious. "All your being and all your life?" he said, still watching her.

"All my being and all my life," she answered, looking out in front of her.

After the lapse of a few moments she turned her face to him, and for three or four seconds each pair of eyes sent across to the other the same satisfying, wordless message.

They unlinked their hands and sat back in their chairs. Keith was playing absently with a key which had been given him at the bureau.

"What is the number on it?" asked Aimée.

He examined it. "Four-three-six," he said.

"What a queer patriarch of a key! How did you come by the poor old thing?"

"It's the one they gave me."

"It must be a struggle for him to get up all those stairs."

"I'll be charitable and take him in a lift."

"Oh, even I do that," said Aimée, "with my comparative stripling."

"Why, what is yours?" he asked abruptly.

"Two-four-two." She gazed artlessly at the

fountain. "You are on the fourth floor, and I'm on the second, and you are in the east wing, and I'm in the west."

There was a slight pause. "It's an immense hotel," said Keith thoughtfully.

"Oh yes." Aimée was still looking at the fountain. "And the corridors are curiously planned. You go down three wide passages and two long narrow ones, and up a short flight of stairs and down a curly one, and then you are back at the place you started from. By that time you are as tired as possible, because it's quite a long way."

Keith pondered the matter for a few moments. "Of course, it's absurd," he said.

"Yes, that's what the *valets-de-chambre* think when they see you come back the second time."

"What did you say your number was?"

"Two-four-two." Aimée repeated the information with engaging simplicity.

"And mine is four-three-six," he reiterated, slowly.

"It's a long bridge of sighs, isn't it?"

"I wonder if I could change it?"

"I wonder?" said Aimée, still preserving her countenance.

"I must say that it's too small, or that I don't like the outlook, and ask them to give me one in the other wing."

"Oh, my *dear* Howard!" At last she turned and

rended him. "What a circumscribed world an Englishman has! He looks round a little island, as a baby looks round a little room, and never imagines there is anything different outside it. Breathe, silly: you are not in London. Breathe air that has no noxious hypocrisy in it. Go and tell them you want a room next to Mrs. Hughes's."

Chapter XXV

FROM Paris they went to Bern, the city of fountains and cobble-stones and covered side-walks, and of the horse-shoe river in its deep ravine.

This is a composite century. We are stubbornly primitive in the midst of our strenuous modernism. In days of subterranean rails and wireless telegraphy we warm our beds with hot-water bottles. In Bern electric cars run in a medieval setting. Over the old stones and between the fifteenth-century houses, they ring and clang towards the great high-piered bridges, the work of modern engineers. Aimée sat with Howard on the terraces and looked over the river, far below, to the distant white peaks of the Oberland. She wept in the cathedral, built by the Mother Church and torn from her hands to serve the uses of an unimaginative religion, debased from the organ epic of its foundation to the prim prose of severest Calvinism.

They passed their days in leisurely, unenterprising content, lingering in the garden of their hotel,

walking in the shade of the trees near the river, driving to the pleasant places outside the city, drinking iced coffee in the cool *pâtisserie* shops. They never went out until after déjeuner. There was no reason why they should make a stringent use of time. They were not there to see sights. They merely wanted one another in a sympathetic environment—an environment which could reflect, in however small a degree, the emotions in their own hearts. The scenery was not the object of their journey: it was simply the back-sheet they had chosen for the Eden of themselves.

When the spirit moved them, they left Bern and went to Thun—Thun, where the hot light beat upon the stones of the market square, and brought out the colours of the painted woodwork on the enclosing buildings. It is that colour—the vivid rainbow tints, as you look down a street—which, more than anything else, differentiates a continental town to British eyes. The tone of an English street, however artistically planned, is always a neutral grey. On one side of the square stood the old Town Hall, on another the picturesque hostelry of the "Couronne," which had offered hospitality long before the stone of the large hotels by the lake had been quarried. Aimée pictured how, in the days before France was torn by the Revolution, some such traveller as Casanova

—prince of charlatans and adventurers, friend of cardinals and kings—had swept up to its doors with a rattle of wheels and a jingle of harness. She saw him alight from his carriage, in his splendid clothes and with his exquisite manners, to be conducted by the host to his best suite of apartments, for one of his sumptuous meals with one of his hundred mistresses. The name and the thought repainted for her the colour of those days: Giacomo Casanova, the magnificent Venetian, who, before the time of railways, had travelled Europe again and again from Lisbon to Petersburgh, and from Copenhagen to Naples; who had walked with Frederick the Great and chatted with Voltaire, flirted with Madame de Pompadour and been decorated with the Order of the Golden Spur by the Pope of Rome; who had crossed the Bridge of Sighs, a prisoner in chains, and escaped from his living death; who had witnessed cock-fights in London, dallied in seraglios in Constantinople, and practised occult arts in the environs of Paris; who had loved every woman he saw and dared to violate nunneries; who had lost a fortune on the turn of a card; who had duped statesmen by his brazen effrontery; who had bluffed and swindled and fought; who had fed every appetite to repletion, and who had lived to a hale old age!

Here, at Thun, they sat sometimes under the

plane-trees in a little square gravelled plot overlooking the rushing river, watched it curling beneath the covered bridges, and wondered what manner of people dwelt behind the green-shuttered windows of the decaying hotel opposite. When they were tired of sitting, they walked slowly along its bank till they came to the margin of the lake, where the great trinity of snow-piles above Interlaken faced them across the water. One day they got up early and climbed to the summit of the Stockhorn, the overhanging peak, tipped with snow, which looks so formidable when seen from the lake, but which, from the other side, can be reached by well-footed and reasonably careful people without serious difficulty. Keith was somewhat averse to taking Aimée, but she was a good climber and laughed him into it. So outstripped him during the ascent, and again and again, on the pretext that he was afraid of losing sight of her, he called her to stop. The youth who had shown them the way, with professional distaste for unnecessary work, declined the last few hundred yards, when the remainder of the track was plain, so they finished the climb without him. They stood for a few minutes on the top, breathing the wild air, gazing round at the snow-fields and down at the tiny dwellings of men, alone, as it seemed,

on the summit of the world. Then they took hands and skipped back to the warmth of the valley.

Continuing their tranquil progress, they moved a few days later to Spietz and thence, by the mountain railway, to Les Avants, above the Lake of Geneva. This was the loveliest place they had visited. They seemed perched in an eagle's nest in the very heart of the Alps. Two thousand feet below them the towns of Montreux and Vevey and Territet clustered by the side of the lake. They sat for hours on the mountain-side—a soft green now, where it had been white in the spring with narcissus—satisfied and stirred by the beauty. As Aimée looked down at the blue lake, shimmering in the sun, feeling Keith beside her, the love of living raced through her. It seemed to her that, of all gifts, the gift of life itself was the best. She could conceive nothing, in any world, so exquisite as to go on living just as she was living then.

"What are you thinking of?" asked Keith, one day. There had been a long time of silence.

"Simply that I'm perfectly happy," she answered, looking straight at the jagged peaks of the Dent du Midi.

"Schopenhauer says that no one was ever perfectly happy in the present."

"I don't care what Schopenhauer says: I don't

want anything more," persisted Aimée, "than to stop just like this for ever."

"Sitting here?"

"Yes."

"That only means you are not conscious at this moment of any unsatisfied needs; it's only negative happiness. In a few hours it will be night, and you would get cold and stiff and hungry. A time would inevitably come when you would decidedly want something more."

"Well, I suppose, in a sense," said Aimée, "if you worry it out, all happiness is negative."

"Yes; pain is positive, but happiness is only the negation of pain. It lies in something to which we are looking forward. It is always beyond: we are always reaching out to it; and, sometimes, more rarely, we are looking back as well. We never realize its attainment; for the moment of fulfilment is the moment of passage. There is no pausing, even for the fraction of a second, on the pinnacle."

"Aren't *we* on the pinnacle?"

"Not at any one moment. We are resting near it, living in to-morrow and in yesterday. The mere knowledge of love, however deep it may be, is not sufficing. Its joy comes from the stretching out—always the stretching out—consciously or subconsciously, to some fuller and fuller expression

of itself. When we say we are completely happy, we mean we are living in an ecstasy of expectation. It never means anything else. Schopenhauer is right: there is no such thing as present happiness."

"I think it's a misfortune," said Aimée pensively, "to have a mind that is too closely analytic. Ordinary people can take things as they find them; and what does it matter that they are really happy in prospect or in retrospect, if they *think* they are happy in the present?"

"It doesn't matter in the least," said Keith, laughing. "I question if all the abstract ideas of all the philosophers really matter, except as intellectual entertainment. It's rather nice to be able to say to yourself, 'Yes, that's true: I've often thought it.'"

"But you feel rather sorry that he has *said* it, and you haven't, don't you?"

She contrived to look a little provoking when she said this. Howard caught her and kissed her lips, again and again, accessible. Then she put her hands round the back of his head and held him.

"I don't care a bit for stuffy old German philosophers," she said, presently. "They don't know." She stretched herself on the warm grass and laid her head on his lap, looking out to the mountains.

"This *is* happiness. I don't want to die."

It was about a week later, when they had been

away nearly a month, that she said to him one day, while they were having tea on the balcony of her room at the hotel: "I hate time!"

"So does everybody," said Keith lightly. "My fortieth birthday is becoming quite discernible with the naked eye."

"And our honeymoon has only two more days to run."

He looked across at her in blank astonishment, and with a little apprehension. "What on earth do you mean?"

"Well, we can't go on like this for ever."

"Of course not. We must decide where to live. But why do you talk arbitrarily of two days?"

"We shall have been away a month then. I don't think there is any precedent for a honeymoon longer than that."

"We will make a honeymoon of our lives."

She did not answer. She went on with her tea. But a few minutes later she said: "You must leave me in two days, Howard."

He had been leaning with his elbows on the balcony. He turned and smiled, with deprecating tenderness. He thought she was still playing on the theme of the honeymoon. "I shall not leave you for two years, my dearest, or twenty, or forty, I hope."

"Oh, my dear——" Her breath caught. "But

I am in earnest. We must separate—at least, for a time."

"I can't understand you in the least this afternoon," he said, changing his tone. "You have suddenly imbued two days with some fantastic value."

"It's the end of a dream. We can't dream for ever." The French "r," which had appealed to him even when she personally was an object of indifference, rippled prettily in the repeated word, pretty in itself. "Have you ever thought about finances, or any mundane things at all?"

"Yes, of course."

"How much?"

"How much have I thought?"

"Yes."

"What a silly question!" He smiled a little.

"You have nothing but your work, have you, and you have your family to provide for? And I have nothing at all in the world—except a marriage settlement, and I suppose that is valueless now."

"It may be necessary, I'm afraid," he said reflectively, "to live moderately for a time. But the need will only be temporary. I must do some portraits."

"Where?" asked Aimée.

"How do you mean, 'where'?"

"Where will you paint them?"

"Wherever we live."

"And where can we live?"

"Wherever you like. I don't have to catch the morning train for the city. Wherever you can put an easel and a canvas."

"Not in England?"

"No," he answered, after a moment's thought, "I suppose not."

"Paris?"

"Paris might do for a time."

"And why should sitters come over to Paris, when they can be painted in London by celebrated men?"

"Oh, you have worked round to it," he said, again smiling. "Well, don't you bother. There are vain people all over the world."

"Yes, but not people who are prepared to pay big prices to have it gratified—only English and Americans—and when they discover you are living unconventionally, they'll boycott you, however well you paint. You *couldn't* paint yourself out of the boycott."

"I'll make you plenty of money, Aimée," he said lightly. "Don't be afraid."

"Oh, you are mistaking me," she said quickly. "I'm not afraid. I could do without—almost anything—with you."

"Then we start with a good spirit," he answered buoyantly. "We can carry the thing through. I shall be prejudiced to some extent possibly, but not to the point that you imagine."

"It's true, Howard." Aimée was deeply in earnest. "You are not like a writer. A writer can do what he likes. People will read his books, if they're good, whatever his personal history."

"It's much the same with anybody who can rise above a certain level."

"Oh no, it's not, *it's not!*" cried Aimée, almost vehemently. "The grossest personal things don't kill a writer, don't kill his work and his fame. But think of a statesman. The breath of a hint of anything unorthodox in his life—unless he can suppress it—ruins him irretrievably."

"I'm not a statesman," said Keith. "Besides, we shall both be divorced before long, and then we can become an ordinary married couple, such as their souls love, and go and live in England again."

"I shall never be divorced," said Aimée quietly. She pushed her chair from the tea-table and turned to look, with a kind of longing, a kind of entreaty, at the scene of unmarred peace and beauty spread out before her. "As long as we live and look out together at this lovely world, you and I are pariahs, my dear."

"Even if that is the price, it is not too high," said Keith. "And we have undertaken to face it. We can't retrace our steps now."

"Yes, we can. That is what I want you to understand. You can still go back, and I can still go back."

"Aimée!" A dark flush came out on his face. A stern, astonished reprimand was in his voice.

"No, no; don't get angry. Listen. I shall *not* go back, whatever happens, but *you* can."

A short scoffing laugh was the only reply he made.

Aimée turned from the balustrade, and, resting her elbows on the table, looked at him intently. "I mean—we are not strangers now. We have given up all our secrets. You know the worst of me and the best of me. I am no longer a person with a sort of glamour who seems desirable on the surface. You know me better than any man or any woman has ever known me. And now I want you to go back to England, with that knowledge, and—and think it over."

"That won't take long." He felt in his pocket for his cigarette-case. "You are the dearest woman that ever lived, and this is rather silly talk."

"No, you *must* go—you *must*—you *must!*" Aimée was pressing her chin on her gripped hands, her face and her voice suddenly tense with resolve.

Keith lighted the cigarette and put a foot on the rail of the balcony, leaning back in his chair. He was prepared to follow the matter out, without seriousness, in an abstract, speculative way.

"Well, and supposing I did," he said, "and even granting the incredible event that I decided to throw you over, where would you go?"

"You wouldn't be throwing me over. You've never done anything to contract any obligation. It has all been my doing since the day you turned your back on me in Brue's studio. I meant to have you, Howard, and I've got you. I've torn you up by the roots and planted you on this balcony."

"Evidently a nutritious soil. But where would you go?"

"I should stay here—in Switzerland."

"Yes, but eventually? What would become of you?"

Aimée thought for a few moments. "I could manage," she answered. "I can sing and dance as well as my mother could."

"But there would be an interim. What about that?"

Again Aimée hesitated. "I have a good many jewels," she said, looking down: "some hundreds of pounds' worth."

Keith dropped his foot and turned to her. "Aimée, how *can* you think it of me?"

"I don't—I don't really, Howard." She spoke with a rush of instinctive sentiment, almost of apology, dropping her arms on the table, her hands still clasped. "Do try to see what I feel. When I sent for you to Paris, it might have been for an hour's advice. You knew no more, but you came. Since then, things have gone on and on. You have never had a moment to think, to pause, to realize properly a great impending change in your life and all that it would involve."

"I decided it all long ago. I was only waiting for your word."

"Yes, but you didn't know me then—really. You may have been influenced because I was pretty and magnetic and—and just human and a woman. You can't judge while you are here with me: there are so many things that make it difficult. You can only see one part of the picture. If you were away, free, in your own studio, back among your concerns and—and friends, it would be different. The present would seem much less big and the future much bigger. It means so much to you, and I want to feel that at least you have had a chance of seeing it steadily and deciding about it calmly. Oh, if you like, call it a whim, a silly woman's fancy, but do it for me, Howard—do

it for *me*." She had risen and crossed behind the table to his side.

He, too, got up, looking at her with a puzzled expression.

"It wouldn't be a waste of time," she went on, as he did not answer. "You came away in such a hurry. There must be a lot of things you ought to attend to."

"But how can I leave you in a foreign hotel alone?"

"I was alone when you came to Paris, and I have had to tell you more about Continental travelling than you have told me."

He waved his hand across her eyes to disperse the imploring look in them. "Very well," he said, with surface lightness, but with deep reluctance underneath. "It's an amazing whim, but, to satisfy you, I'll go back to London for a week."

She leaned against the frame of the open window a little heavily. "A week."

He laughed. "Yes, a week, if I can endure it." Then he looked at her closely. "Why, Aimée dear, what is it?"

She stood up and smiled at him. "I was thinking," she said, "what a lot of days there are in a week, and what a lot of hours in a day."

He was not quite satisfied. Her momentary expression and attitude had stirred in him some

indefinite apprehension. But it was very dim and transiently realized, and her smiling eyes mocked it.

"When am I to go? In two days?"

She nodded.

"And will you stay here?"

"No, I couldn't without you. Everything would seem horrid. I want to get nearer the mountains. I'll go to Chamonix."

"You'll wait for me there?"

She did not speak for a moment. "Yes," she said, "I'll wait for you at Chamonix."

They had retreated gradually within the room.

"Oh, hold me, Howard!" she cried out suddenly. "Hold me safe."

Chapter XXVI

At the little station of Martigny, in the Rhone Valley, they parted. The Rhone Valley puts no impediment in the way of the traveller so long as he keeps straight on, but if he turns either to the right or to the left he must go over a mountain; and that is what Aimée was doing. For nearly half an hour Keith could see her tiny train, toiling, with many zigzags, up the steep incline. It would take her, through gorges and over passes, to Argentière and the Valley of Chamonix. He did not once move his eyes from it; and, at last, after it had wriggled round its last turn, and was quickening speed on the easier gradient before it disappeared over the brow, he saw something white flutter from one of the windows.

He held up his own handkerchief, stretched out in both hands above his head, until the train was no longer to be seen, and then turned and walked along the platform with a slightly supercilious air, feeling that someone had probably been watching him. He asked the first official he met, rather

sternly and in English, when the next train would leave for Geneva. When the man courteously indicated that the language was not among his accomplishments, he passed on without trying to put his inquiry into French. He did not feel inclined, in fact, to speak in any tongue just then. Aimée had always done all the talking; and the man's blank failure to comprehend had thrown before his mind's eye, in vivid contrast, a picture of her chatting brightly to some uniformed official (who invariably appeared to be in a most excellent temper), and occasionally turning to him, laughing, to ask something in English.

Aimée herself, in the meantime, was sitting by the plate-glass window of her railway-carriage, looking down into the stupendous gorge along which the train was passing. Round corners and hollows it crept on its perilous ledge. It seemed incredible, almost, that the frail rails to which its wheels were insecurely clinging could hold it from toppling over.

Still, it worked steadily on, and Aimée knew it would not fall. After a time it crossed the abyss by some natural bridge; and then there were only trees to be seen from her window, close and passing quickly. Most of the passengers went over to the other side of the carriage, but she did not follow them. All the thoughts that had chased her pil-

low during that long sleepless night before she left London were again moving in her brain. Howard had gone away, but he would come back to her. If he had a dozen wives, and if they all were bound to suffer as much as Mrs. Keith suffered, he would come back to her. The sun might not rise to-morrow, but Howard, if they both lived, would come to Chamonix in a week; and he would not again be sent away.

Nothing could give him back his old life, if she lived, nothing could give Mrs. Keith back her old peace. And then she thought how it would be if she did not live. A man—when some emotional passage in his personal history, however vivid, had been definitely closed—after a time could pick up the threads of his ordinary life. He could close some vibrant memories, some precious secrets which he shared with no one in the living world, in a little casket; and he could store it somewhere in the centre of his heart and live outside it. The centre of Howard's heart had never belonged to Mrs. Keith: she had not been robbed of it. And he would suffer no loss in his art. It would gain; it would be strengthened. He would become capable of fuller expression, because something unforgettable, something that had made every string of his being answer, had come into his life.

A *man* could do that. With her—a woman—it

was different. Other arms, other kisses, other intimate companionships were, of all unthinkable things, unthinkable. They had been impossible before: they were ten thousand times more impossible now. For a month she had known love in its Empyrean: the peace of it, the utter trust of it, the rippling, rushing, surging tide of it, the pinnacled, exultant song of it. And Chester—dear good Chester—with his finicky, scrupulous, courteous ways and his kind, orderly, passionless affection! Even if she had loved him—— Oh, but she couldn't love him!

And he was waiting at home for the last day of August, when she would no longer stand between him and the wish of his heart. It was now the 26th. Five days, and the bill so often renewed would finally mature. He was some years under fifty yet; he might have a large family. Thousands of women would marry him for his means, and Nell Legard would marry him for himself. It was curious how it had come about that everyone—everyone—in the end would be happier if it chanced that she did not live. And she was so full of life and the need of life. Life was so good, so sweet.

A few hours later she sat in the veranda of her hotel at Chamonix, and looked across the valley at

the range of Mont Blanc. She was no longer in Switzerland: this was her own land of France, the old kingdom of Savoy. The mountains were not remote, mysterious peaks here, rising from no distinguishable place, but close companions. A little way to the right, the giant of them all slanted up from the valley in great reaches of level snow—miles and miles of it. Its wide white plateaus and easy hummocky slopes made it seem curiously low—a snow-covered Skiddaw. Yet it took two days to climb it, with the intervening night spent among the rough comfort of the hut on the Grands Mulets. And steadily, since it was first ascended in 1786, it had taken its toll of victims. As she looked at the white wastes on its sleek sides, Aimée remembered how one man, caught in a storm, exhausted, helpless, hopeless, had spent the time while his limbs were numbing, in a hole in the snow, writing a plain, unwhimpering record of his sensations and experiences, with a few personal directions and messages to his wife. Every hour for two days, while it never ceased snowing, he had written a little more and a little more. The rest of his party—friends and guides—were within a few hundred yards of him, dying too; but not one of them could communicate with another, or even know that the others were near: the blinding flakes cloaked sight and sound. When his body was discovered, the

notebook and pencil were still in his hands. Aimée felt glad that his wife *did* get the messages.

In front—straight in front of her—were the Aiguilles, jagged spires, solitary and in groups, a whole line of them, jutting above the warm wooded slope. They were lovely, they were fascinating, they were cruel: against the dark blue evening sky they were like hard lances of steel. Sometimes they were climbed. Up on the left, perched above the Mer de Glace, was the hotel at Montanvert, a bare, barrack-like building, where mountaineers spent the night preceding an attempt. She wondered what their sensations were, and the obsessions of their minds, as they rested there: excitement always, the glamour of peril, the lust of achievement, hope, sometimes fear.

The sun had set behind her, but the tips of the spires were rosy. She examined them all, one by one. There seemed very sparse foothold on any of their cold sides. Among a group almost in the middle was the Grèpon, the most terrible of them all. Men scaled these dangerous needles, and took credit for the feat, but they always had guides: it was the guides who led the way and who did the work. If she could climb one without a guide, she would be the first woman who had ever done so. It was a mad, inconceivable thing: a thousand chances would be against her. She would be offering her-

self to the fates, and they could take her if they would. They could take; she would not give, she *could* not give. Somehow it seemed to her that, if she stood alone upon the point of one of those spears, she would have won her right to live.

The next day, in the afternoon, well shod, in short skirts, with a light ice-axe, she set out for Montanvert.

A search party which was sent out three days later found her lying in a little valley of snow, among the higher slopes, near the foot of the grèpon. There were no marks or bruises upon her. She had not fallen: she had been caught by a storm or by darkness and had died from exhaustion.

Aimée had kept her promises: all her bills were met.

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